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Soft Hand, Sharp; or, The Man With the Sand.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK OF HIGH PINE," ETC., ETC., ETC.



I WOKE BETWEEN DOG AND PISTOL, FOR THE SECOND, LIFE WAS VERY UNCERTAIN, AND HE HELD HIS BREATH, NOT DARING TO SPEAK UNTIL THE STORY OF HER WORDS WAS OVER.

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CHAPTER I.

PAST AND FUTURE.

HE was a hollow-cheeked, slenderly-built man of undeterminate age, with light brown hair and blue eyes, who came into Dog Hole by the regular stage from the north. He was, moreover, accompanied by his daughter—a fragile mite of a thing, who, at first glimpse, would have seemed wonderfully out of place journeying toward the still rougher regions that lay to the south, if one had not obtained a second look at her eyes. They to a certain extent were unfathomable; yet they had a steady firmness in their stare that seemed to indicate a cool self-possession and reliance that was the one thing needed—even more than pure physical strength—in these regions where life was very uncertain, and emergencies were daily met.

"Here we rest a few days, Kate," said this sad-mannered gentleman, as they dismounted and made their way into the Big Dam Hotel.

"It is very provoking, but from what the driver tells me we will be unable to go on at once unless we choose to try our fortunes on foot, and that would hardly suit you or me."

"Scarcely; but why must we remain here?"

"There has been some trouble on the lower part of the route. No one cares to go into certain danger, and possible death. Besides, there has been a rush to some newly discovered diggings on the Gila, and private conveyances are scarce."

"Perhaps it is as well then. To go on now might leave too broad a trail, while if we remain a few days it may be that our track will be lost. We can wait and see."

Nevertheless the girl uttered a sigh, as though she was anxious to be gone; and the two passed through the hospitable doors of the Big Dam with anything but cheerful countenances. They would willingly have gone further, if only to have fared worse.

As they entered they came face to face with a tall, handsome young man, who seemed as much surprised as themselves at the meeting.

He stared a moment, and then came forward again with a cry of delight upon his lips.

"Is it really you?" he exclaimed, holding out his hands to the man, but resting his eyes upon the girl.

"What good wind blows Herman Knox hitherward? I had given up all hope of meeting you again after your mysterious disappearance."

Father and daughter hardly looked as charmed, though they did not ignore his address.

"Glad to see you again, Mr. Hayes, and Kate here, no doubt, can say the same; but would it be too much to ask you to remember we are here incog.? I will see you again, in a moment and explain as much as is necessary."

"Certainly, certainly. I understand. We're the Simon pure Jefferson Bricks out here. We are always ready to draw a moist pen slick through everything, and start fresh. A nod is as good as a wink. Shake, Miss Kate, and I'm off. I'll see you both again."

He spoke rapidly, and with some little confusion; but there was a heartiness about his voice that showed the depth of his welcome, even if the plain construction of his words was a little awkward.

Doubtless Mr. Tom Hayes had a hazy idea that Herman Knox was a defaulting cashier, or something of the kind, from the East, and had his reasons for not having his name mentioned. Men of that kind were so plenty that another was no great surprise—especially when he brought with him a daughter like Kate.

He went on out and lingered around a little in the hope that Mr. Knox would join him.

He was not disappointed. In a very few moments the gentleman came out, alone.

"Glad to see you here, Hayes. Never thought of it, though now I recollect you did tell me that Dog Hole was your local habitation. We're stranded here for a day or so, and it's good to find that there's at least one person in town who is not altogether a stranger, and who can be counted on as a friend."

"That's all right; but it wouldn't take you long to get acquainted. You never saw such a friendly place as this is, anyway. They just dote on strangers, they do; and I'll bet any little sum you want to name that if you'd go out there in the street and say you're a stranger, down on your luck, dead broke, and in want of a starter, a dozen men would chip right in to stake you and take you over to the Tiger saloon, where they deal a square game without a flyer. Say! you're not hard up are you—waiting for remittances, and that sort—are you? If you are, just draw right on me; I'm flush."

Tom Hayes spoke with sudden earnestness. Nothing would have pleased him better than to have Kate Knox's father his debtor for a few hundreds.

"Not a bit of it. Wonderful enough it is I've not met a road-agent since I left 'Frisco. They generally scent me a hundred miles off; but this time I'm lucky. And I've got enough with me to tempt them, too. But the fact is it's not the road-agents I'm caring for just now. You remember how you picked me up in 'Frisco with a knife in my shoulder? Well, the same party is hunting me yet. I had hopes that I was making a blind trail, and that when they came to the end of it they would be at fault; but I have my doubts."

"They? Who are they? Can I help you? If they show their faces here, let me know, and I'll jerk them up in a hurry, law or no law. Don't you know I'm a deputy sheriff, and all that? I hadn't been here a week before they shoved it on me. They'd *lost* the last thirteen, one way or another, and as I was a likely-looking stranger, they thought they'd try me. If I went up the flume it didn't make so much difference. It would go that far toward saving the town from being depopulated."

"That's queer. Why, how did they lose them? Thirteen, you say?"

"Yes, thirteen—or thereabouts. I won't swear to one or two. Some went under at the Tiger, and some went up jumping claims and looking after the agents; and the people themselves hung two or three for collecting funds that they forgot to turn over, shooting prisoners to save board bills, and such like nonsense. You see, Dog Hole is a bad place when you get it started, and all Dog Hole is right behind me now. Can't I help you anyway, say?"

"I'm afraid you can't. You hardly want to hang a woman. By the way, did you ever hear of a gang called the Red League?"

"Can't say that I did. They never operated around here; and they'd better not begin it. Why?"

"I hardly supposed so. Perhaps it was all moonshine. I had a warning about them, and that a man named Page was their captain. If there was truth in it at all, I can well imagine that he is on my trail. Yet who was it sent the letter, and why? I am more afraid of my informant after all. I guess the Red League is a myth. But, then, the letter shows more knowledge of my affairs than I want floating around loose. They will rob me, between them, yet, and afterward slay me. Then, what will become of Kate and—the rest?"

"Don't borrow trouble. If you or your daughter need a friend—I am here."

"Very true, and I believe you will do your best; but the best don't amount to much for a dead man, don't you see? And when I am gone there will be danger for Kate that even you cannot understand. Let that go, however. If I should decide to leave here at once, could you manage to get me a couple of mounts—something that would carry us fast and far?"

Tom Hayes looked a little queerly at his friend. Had he not met him before, he might have had even dark suspicions. He was anxious to favor the man to the best of his ability, but he also had a selfish end of his own. He would sooner keep Knox there a month than shorten his stay a single hour. If he was drifting around, unattached, as he believed him to be, what more suitable than that he should locate at Dog Hole? There was a good opening there for the capital that he knew Herman Knox possessed, and Kate would be a very acceptable acquisition to the society of the place should it blossom into the thriving city he looked for.

At the same time there might be a real necessity for haste; and if there was he would not hesitate. Sooner or later they would meet again, and any help he might give now would be all the better then. He thought all this over while he remained silent, apparently, in deep thought. Then he answered:

"Mounts are scarce in Dog Hole, just now. That is, something good that is for sale. You're welcome to my own mare if you can't do any better and I'll have a chance to pick something else up soon. That's about all I can suggest—unless you could strike a trade with Madam Pharisee; she has two or three clippers. And by the same token she knows how to use them."

"Madam Pharisee! And who is she?"

"You don't mean to say you never heard of her?"

"Never."

"You're behind the age, then. I can't tell you who she is; but there's a good many answers to what she is. Take her all in all—she is a singular woman. Handsome, too; though she's not as young as she once was. She has an interest in several mines that I know of, can play cards with the best of them here, and has a string of mustangs that can clean out the valley. She's sharp on a trade, and you might strike a bargain with her, if you think you can keep your eyes open and pocket reasonably well closed."

"I hardly want to have much dealing with that kind of a woman," answered Knox with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Don't know but what you're right. But I can tell you this is no ordinary woman. I don't know whether she's in league with the devil, or only has a thundering good head for guessing. She can tell you everything that has happened, and about three-fourths of what is going to come. Say, now, it just strikes me: if you want to know anything about that Red League you were speaking of why not go to Madam Pharisee? It may cost you a hundred dollars and yet she won't open her mouth. It may cost you less! and you'll learn everything you want to know. She's mighty uncertain, but suppose you try her and see."

"When—now?"

"Bless you, no. To-night. I have the entry, and I'll take you around and see whether she'll talk."

While he was giving this answer Tom was thinking. A shadow of a plot was beginning to rise in his mind; a very innocent plot, as he thought, but one that might help him very materially. He hardly expected that Herman Knox would fall into his little trap, but he seemed to, without much urging.

"A fortune-teller, is she?" said Knox, reflectively. "She may be a fraud, but all the same there are several things I would like to test her skill upon, and as it combines amusement and business I don't know but what I will visit her to-night. Now, enough of this. Come in. Kate will be glad to see you, though the accommodations of the reception-room are scarcely up to those you may remember. She's a good girl, though; and if I am her father I say she would shine in any place."

Tom Hayes thought so, too, as he followed his friend.

"Not a word to her of what we have been talking about," was Knox's last injunction, as they passed through the door.

No doubt he had a very pleasant visit, and Kate was gracious enough, but Herman Knox scarcely spoke to him, and his face was somber enough as he bowed the young man out.

When father and daughter were alone together the former turned suddenly:

"And remember, Kate, if anything should happen to separate us you will find me at Gila City. If I am not there strike straight on south. You know the way."

CHAPTER II.

A FAIR DEAL WITHOUT A FLYER.

THE house occupied by Madam Pharisee had little external ornament to boast of. It had, in fact, rather a forbidding aspect, since it was an ancient and tumble-down looking "doby," by no means extensive in size. Herman Knox approached it with some misgivings, and felt something like withdrawing from his bargain. If he had been alone he would undoubtedly have done so, but Hayes laughed at his hesitancy.

"I'm not afraid, you understand, but I must say it looks like a house where one might get his throat cut and no one outside be any the wiser. It's the only house around here that has any shutters, and those that are about don't look any too inviting. Tell the truth now, Hayes:—the woman is a fraud, and the place simply a gaming den."

"That last part is not so far from the truth, but I assure you I don't consider there's a mite of danger or I wouldn't bring you here. Of course there are shutters—and they're iron clad at that—but that's to keep out the unworthy. She's only a woman, you understand, and she lives alone, and often has a mint of money about her. It don't do to have things all open for every Tom, Dick and Harry to walk through. She can handle the tools, well enough, to be sure; but, if she didn't take some precaution, she'd have the chance to be using them all the time; and that's what she don't want. Still, I don't urge you. I wanted to show you around a little, and give you a chance to deal with the madam for a couple of her mustangs. What say you? Shall we go in or not?"

"Go in, then, by all means. I suppose it's all folly, but if one don't pay too dear I don't doubt but that it will be worth the money. But, is she really alone?"

"Sometimes she has a couple of servants, but they sleep in another building in the rear: you won't see much of them."

While discussing the madam's mansion they had walked past it. They turned now and came back.

"Don't show your surprise too much when you get inside. It's not much to look at from here—but when you go in it's something else."

Hesitating no longer, Hayes stepped up to the door, and, reaching well up, struck with his fist a small knob that projected from the side of the door-frame.

Somewhere in the distance a bell faintly tinkled, and as soon as he heard the sound he struck the knob again, rapidly, three times.

Almost immediately the door flew open, impelled by a suddenly released spring, and the two entered, Hayes carefully closing the door after him. At once they were enveloped in utter darkness.

"Stand steady for a moment, now. I have an idea that if you went straight forward you'd

drop into the prettiest kind of a trap, though I'm not altogether certain of it. I don't want to know too much about the ins and outs of the place. I know enough now for a deputy sheriff."

While Herman Knox stood by the side of his guide, somewhat subdued by the silence and the darkness, there was a sudden gleam of light, as if from a dark lantern, cast full upon their faces. Without seeing, they could be seen.

Then the light disappeared, but in their front, a few yards away, a door opened, and Hayes led the way forward.

It was really a luxuriously furnished room that they entered, and was much larger and better filled than Knox expected to see.

There were fifteen or twenty, young men and old, gathered around a table that was invisible from the hall, and upon the other side of it was Madam Pharisee herself, holding a little silver box in her hand.

In plain English, she was dealing faro, and the bystanders were betting against the game very liberally, though in a quieter way than at the average Western game. Perhaps the silver-mounted revolver at her waist might have been at first the calming power behind the throne; but now the picked frequenters of the place knew its ways so well that a loud word was scarcely ever spoken, at least while a game was going on, and a quarrel was still more seldom known.

As the two advanced toward the table, Herman Knox hung back, allowing his companion to get a pace in advance, while he narrowly studied the face of the woman, at first sight of whom he had given a slight start, then a puzzled look came into his eyes.

There was certainly something familiar about her face, and yet he began to realize that he had never seen it before.

At all events, she was younger than he had expected her to be, much younger; and a great deal handsomer. He did not wonder that there were plenty of victims for her bank; and he even thanked his stars that he was not as young as he had been. Such a woman, a few years ago, he thought, might not have had to labor hard to fascinate him. There were three or four hundred dollars on the cards that were pictured on the queer velvet cloth before her, but she drew the turn as carelessly as her more fashionable sister might thrum an air on a guitar, or execute a *morceau* on a Steinway Grand. One thing was certain, she had not the real gambler's fever, and loss or gain was simply part of the business which, in the long run, was sure to win.

No one noticed their entry until the close of the deal, which came almost instantly. Then every one looked up.

"A friend of mine, who will probably deposit lightly in Madam Pharisee's bank before he leaves."

The madam acknowledged the informal introduction, which was addressed to her, by touching lightly with her forefinger, the broad brim of her light felt hat.

"The bank is open and its whole capital stands behind a single turn if you choose; but we'd sooner not be crowded too hard. John there is assistant cashier this evening. Your friend's face is not familiar, but he's welcome all the same. Luck runs about even to-night, so that it is a good time to make his majesty's acquaintance."

That was all she had to say to them. Her fingers deftly move the cards together, some one cut, they were placed once more in the box, and another deal began.

Knox had invested in checks upon the gentle hint, and taken his place along with the other players, but he was fully as unconcerned about his ventures as the dealer seemed to be about hers. He threw a couple of chips on the queen and won; let them lie there and lost; doubled the amount on the queen and won and then copered and won again.

It was hard to say whether he was testing a system, or an agglomeration of systems, or not. He played his cards to win twice and lose as often in the course of the deal, but as he used his judgment as to the order in which they were to win or lose he was really playing on his luck, which seemed to serve him well enough. Though he did not win rapidly there was a steady gain that soon heaped up quite a pile of chips under his arm.

At last, with a sudden move, he pushed the whole amount forward. There was an ace, deuce and jack in the box and he called that for the turn for all he was worth in checks. In metropolitan circles, between princely gamblers, it might have been nothing, but here it was a large stake for the player, and almost an unprecedented risk for the bank.

"Ah, you will crowd the mourners?" said Madam Pharisee smiling, and with the first word of slang that had fallen from her lips; "You are a little over our limit."

"I thought this game had no flyer?" answered Herman Knox, a trace of weariness in his tone!

"Luck had been running very even before you came in. The bank is the flyer, but five thousand is the bank. If you win, you would more than size that limit."

"Ah, yes. Let it go, though I lose a few dollars more or less it makes no difference; if I win, the bank is all I can ask for. In a square game you must have some advantage. Any way the one turn will finish it for me."

The madam bowed slightly and drew the cards.

Ace, deuce and jack they were. Truly Mr. Knox was in a vein, and stranger though he was there was a sort of gambler's sympathy for him as the lady dealer quickly laid down the box.

"The bank is closed. You are surely very lucky to-night."

"I always am," answered Knox in a matter-of-fact way. "But if I have spoiled fun I am sorry for it. As I am a stranger here only passing through it is unfortunate because I do not see how you are to take your revenge."

"The bank always gets its revenge in the long run, one way or another. Don't let that trouble you but cash in. John will attend to you."

John redeemed the checks as imperturbably as he had sold them, the table was pushed back against the wall so as to leave more room, and something like a general conversation began, though several parties took possession of as many smaller tables and commenced to deal at short cards.

As Madam Pharisee was not included in any of these games there was an opportunity for conversation, and Tom Hayes motioned her a little aside.

"My friend came in here on business, though he talks now as if he wanted to throw up the contract. The fact is he's wanting to buy a real tip-top number one mustang or two and I told him you had half a dozen. Can he buy?"

"If I had known all that in time it might have been worth while, like Maj. Scott's coon, to come down. It would have been more profitable to send him a couple around to the Big Dam, and say no more about it! But really, I cannot say to-night. Perhaps to-morrow morning I might send him an answer."

"I knew you wouldn't bear spite, you're not that kind. And he'll pay a fine price, too. Well, that was one thing; but there was another—we may as well heap it all up. You needn't wait for to-morrow for this, either. I've been telling him that when you get on your big black cap and star-spangled banner, you can tell everything that ever happened or was likely ever to happen, so he'd like you to give him a dive into the past and a dip into the future, with a small sized sprinkling of the present. The boys can run things in decent shape without you, and you could open your temple in the other room. I want to see what he'll be like when you get through reading his pedigree. It's my opinion that you'll just throw him wild."

"You want a great deal to-night—more than you'll get if I don't change my mind. That's the privilege of the sex, though. I may find out that it's best to do so; if I do I will let you know. Wait a moment, I will consult my magic mirror. If the fates say 'yes,' your friend may learn more of himself than he wants to know."

This strange woman with the voice and face of a girl and the manner of an old woman left the room.

She had been gone some little time when Jack came in—though no one had noticed him go out. Stooping over Herman Knox he said.

"The madam will see you in the grand temple of mystery. Come!"

He caught Knox by the arm and led him away. In a moment more he was face to face with Madam Pharisee at last, and alone.

CHAPTER III.

THE PYTHONESS SPEAKS.

"You wanted to see me, Herman Knox! to know something of your past, present and future. It is well. The fates have sent you hither, and you are face to face with them. Ask and they will answer."

The room was lighted by two lamps that had each a red shade. Every thing looked ghostly in the crimson glare. Under them sat Madam Pharisee, her face in the shadow, and her black robes flowing around her.

At mention of his name Herman Knox started. He had hoped that he was unknown, and had given Hayes a caution, yet upon his entrance it was the first thing that greeted him. That, and the strange surroundings, and the solemn voice, which had lost all of the cheerful carelessness of the gambling room, all caused him to hesitate. In addition, a suspicion that he had had before entering the building, but which had disappeared at the table, now came back to him. He remained silent.

"Speak! what is it that you would know? If you have sought me out of idle curiosity leave me; I have no time for folly."

As she finished there came from the floor at her feet a low, long drawn, dolorous howl, and then an enormous hound rose slowly up and fixed his eyes of fire upon the man. Around his neck the hair ruffled up, as if in anger, and it looked as though he needed but a word to cause him to spring.

"What mummery is this? I have no insane desire to thrust myself into danger; but when

it actually came I never yet flinched from meeting it. If the fates have anything to reveal tell it; or must your hand first be crossed with gold? I know not what led me into this nonsense, but now that I am here I would see it to the end."

"Would you have me speak of the past or the present?"

"I have nothing to do with that. Let the spirit of divination decide."

"Herman Knox, you have had all that destiny could give you, and ruined it in the possession. Whatever you desired you had, yet always lost the enjoyment. In youth you slew your best friend; in manhood you betrayed the woman who loved you most; in old age you are cursed with the ambition of a madman, the love of an idiot, and the jealousy of a fiend. Besides, for wealth that you neither needed nor desired, you have sacrificed life itself. The grave is waiting to receive you; do justice or die!"

"Justice! Indeed!" He spoke with a sneer. "You talk as though you believe that farago of nonsense. If justice had been done, some of us who rustle around in silks and fine linen would have been dead long ago. Don't talk to me about justice; I have had blood enough on my hands; when justice is really done there will be more. Be a little more exact. If you are a sorceress show me the future. Your vague words reveal nothing."

"So be it. Turn and look straight forward. You shall see the end."

As he turned without a word, he heard the hound throw itself upon the floor and lie there slowly panting. At the same instant the flood of crimson light died away and then came utter darkness.

The hand of Herman Knox dropped to his revolver as though he feared an attack; but beyond that he showed no sign; he gazed at the wall as bidden.

In the blackness, then, there came a little, hazy spot of light that grew and grew into a broad circle, dimly phosphorescent.

Then gradually the haze cleared away, the ground grew lighter, and he recognized a broad, alkali plain, with here and there a few sage bushes and cacti.

In the foreground lay a man, with the feathered shaft of an arrow protruding from his breast, while, a little distance off, the wolves were gathering for the feast.

And beyond a doubt the man was Herman Knox.

For only a moment the picture remained there, sharply distinct. Then it faded away and vanished.

"That, Herman Knox, is the end. What more could you know?"

Again the crimson light flooded the room, and the hound rose uttering its low, long moan.

He turned, thrilled a little in spite of himself. It was the simplest of mummery, but he shivered at its reality, even though his suspicions had risen into certainty.

"That is so. I know now, at least, that Madam Pharisee and Varna Page are one and the same. I acknowledge the truth of the picture. More than once I have lain stricken thus—and by your hand—yet I arose. Fate can reveal little more. I must slay or be slain. Which of us is to die?"

He spoke coolly, yet there was a world of meaning in his matter-of-fact tones.

"You are mad. Varna Page was ages older than I, and she died in the mountains where you left her by the side of her dead brother. You fled from her, your wife, then; her ghost is haunting you now."

"It is false. She was not my wife."

"She was the mother of your daughter—the child you stole away from her—and you legally, lawfully married her. She shared your poverty and degradation at a time when fate seemed fierce against you, and then you fled from her, leaving her alone in the world. You made her believe that you were dead, or she would have hunted you down!"

"You seem to know her life well enough, at all events, though I would feel a great deal safer if I could believe you. Prove to me that she died in the mountains, by the side of her outlaw lover, and I will give you back double what I won from your bank to-night."

The woman looked at him steadily for a moment. She was thinking.

"The offer is too small, make it a million, and I swear to you that, practically, I will prove it."

"Yes, until the million is spent. And yet, with that sum you could turn the world upside down, or would if you had your youth once more. Well, when am I to die? and what benefit do you expect to reap from my death?"

"I cannot tell how soon it will be. It has not been revealed. If you reject my offer it may come sooner than you expect."

"You have slain more than one man; I expect you will slay me; yet I cannot kill you unless it be defending my life in the heat of an attack."

"Why should I kill you though—until I have this wealth? So far you have been shrewd enough to keep it beyond my reach. Your

secret might die with you. In that lies your safety. Have no fears, then, for so long as you baffle me in obtaining a share of what should be mine, so long from me your life is safe. I have learned wisdom of late."

"And you have changed your tune—unless you claim only to be Varna Page's executor. But you relieve me. None of that wealth will you ever handle. It is Kate's; and she is a brave girl, wise enough to keep her own. Be still wiser—let the Red League alone. Once were it known that you were connected with that and I would be relieved of all trouble."

The woman started at last.

"The Red League? What do you know of it? And what connection have I with its interests? I swear that it is nothing to me but a foe!"

"Perhaps, perhaps. Yet you and the League are both working for the same end, and I doubt not have bargained to share the spoil. If it was to their interest no doubt they would brush you away as carelessly as I would kill a fly. Between you I will have a fight for it, but I defy you all. Now lead me back to my friend—or say frankly that I am to fight my way out. When you have me so far in your clutches it seems folly to expect you to let me go of your own free will; don't it?"

"But that folly is mine. Remain where you are and count sixty slowly. I will tell your friend to join you in the hall. I have given you this opportunity to right the wrongs that you have done and you have refused; henceforth we meet only as foes. Seek me no more."

She rose as she spoke and swept away, the bloodhound following her, leaving Herman Knox puzzled as to what were her intentions; and only satisfied with himself in that he had never once shown a symptom of quailing. If this was his divorced wife, and he did not doubt it, unless it suited her hand to wait, he had been in no small danger. But he counted the sixty and then the door opened.

In the hall he met Tom Hayes, and without a word the two left the place.

CHAPTER IV.

A CHIEF OF THE RED LEAGUE.

"YOUR friend is ready to meet you, but I doubt if you will find him very communicative as to the things the fates have in store for him. After this it may be as well to ask in advance when you wish to bring any one. His visit has been neither pleasant nor profitable. Take him away with you and watch him well. I have an idea that he is threatened with danger."

This was what Madam Pharisee had said to Tom Hayes; and he had laughed and joined his friend, and left the house, feeling all the same unpleasant sense of something wrong in the atmosphere.

He knew the most of those who had been in the room during the game at faro, and believed that they could be trusted; but news travels fast, and there were others in Dog Hole who, if they heard that this slenderly-built, peaceful-looking stranger was carrying six or seven thousand dollars loose in his pockets would be very apt to lay for him.

He cautioned Herman Knox to that effect, but the latter laughed lightly, just as a man, stoutly built, active in movement, and with his face shaded by a broad sombrero, the rim of which was pulled low down over his brow, passed them.

They went on some little distance, and then Herman Knox halted and looked backward.

"Just as I thought," he murmured. "I'd have been a fool to think otherwise; and for all his slouching gait and shaded face, he could not deceive me. Yonder man is Victor Page; and he is chief of the Red League. They are together again, and my life is not safe for a moment if they once believe I am worth more to them dead than living. It is a year since I last struck them together, and it was no very wide miss of death that I made. I wish that I had the same backing now as then. Jones, of Cinnabar, was a useful man and full of nerve. He and Alabaster Jim, his partner for the time, could hold them all level."

The cause of all this soliloquy was seeing that the man who had just passed, and whose gait had seemed familiar, was entering Madam Pharisee's.

And he was not mistaken in the man, however wide of the mark he may have been in other respects. He entered the house, but not the gambling room. Instead, he made his way to the place where Knox and the madam had held their unsatisfactory interview, a few moments before, and there, almost immediately, he was joined by the latter.

He was silent and still. As she did not see him in motion, she had some trouble in recognizing him under his disguise. Yet recognize him she did, at length.

"Victor Page!" she exclaimed, "what ill-wind blows you here?"

"No ill-wind for you. I come for those who generally strike first and speak afterward."

"Ha! As I thought! The Red League."

"Yes, the Red League, but not so loud, pray. I do not know what ears these walls may have, even if you do. The time has come when we

must again work together, or you must give your pledge to let Herman Knox and his money go."

"Thank you for nothing. It seems to me it should be I that gives that warning. What is he to you that you should meddle with his affairs?"

"Nothing but a prospective victim, who has wealth and a secret. The first we could get through you, but we care not to do it until we learn the truth or falsity of what we have heard. If it was not for that you might this very night be his widow."

"What can this secret be that is worth more than vengeance and gold? Surely you hate the man as well as myself?"

"Gold no doubt. He came from the South and has arranged his business. Now he is going back. Why? That is what we must know. If he has found Lost Lake Valley it is worth while to spend a year on his trail if he only takes us there. After that he will not linger long, you may take your oath on it."

"Well?"

"Well! It is not well. You would hinder all that. It must not be. His knowledge is as good as a life-insurance policy. You have chosen to ignore my existence. Very good. I might say that I ran every risk to help you with a scheme against Pierre Redette, and that therefore you should help me now. I will not. Instead, I say the Red League says that you must keep hands off unless you wish to join us."

"A brave set you Leaguers are! Declare war against a woman, will you? Let it be so. Now I give you warning, for yourself and your gang: Interfere with me at your peril! I will fight you all, exterminate you if need be—and begin with you."

"Scarcely, my dear. You certainly remember something about me of old, and it's scarcely safe to speak to me so boldly. I have been gathering experience fast, and even in the one little year that has just passed, I have laid in heaps of it. I have learned that it is never best to laugh at a threat. Those that threaten me had best count on a short life, a sudden taking off."

"So be it—if you choose. Suppose you begin now."

"By heavens! I've half a mind to take you at your word! Few would be the wiser, and I could vanish and come again in a different form. Don't tempt me too far."

He dropped his hand on the knife at his waist, frowned darkly, and gave a step forward. His hat was pushed back from his brow, and the crimson glare from the lamps fell full upon his face, disclosing the wolfish look that had risen at her taunt.

Knowing the man as she did it was no wonder if Madam Pharisee believed herself in danger.

She raised her hand, and gave a careless snap of her shapely fingers.

"No nearer, if you please! We lived as brother and sister too many years for me to trust you far when you look like that."

Again she snapped her fingers, and between the two sprung the bloodhound, black, gaunt and savage, with open mouth and red eyes.

"Fight him awhile; when he is done with you I promise you that the pieces will receive Christian burial—at least, what can be kept out of his maw. And if his jaws fail, I have this! Away from here, coward! You failed me once, and I have never forgotten! You lived to me a lie of years, and I have never forgiven. I will have no part nor parcel with you nor your Red League. I am one, and a woman—you are a dozen, and men; but I defy you all. He is mine, and I will have him to work my will on!"

She had snapped her fingers carelessly; but the next instant she had whipped out a derringer, from some hidden recess of her dress, and, cocking it, covered him with deadly aim. Between dog and pistol, for the second, life was very uncertain, and he held his breath, not daring to speak until the storm of her words was over.

"You don't fancy old Horrid? That is right; yet you have less nerve than the man you are after. He never even winced. Go, now, while there is time, and tell your League that they can do their worst—I will win or lose all on my own hand."

It was useless to face Madam Pharisee in such mood, and, above all, it was dangerous. Without a word, Victor Page turned and withdrew; and to the last his hand rested on the knife he half-thought he would have to use.

CHAPTER V.

JONES, OF CINNABAR, STRIKES A VEIN OF LUCK.

DOG HOLE CITY, as it was then called, was a thriving town for the time being; though the rush was over and gone, it had left behind it the substantial elements of prosperity. There were capital, enterprise, and a very fair fixed population of live men, who attended largely to their own business, and did not trouble themselves about that of other people. Strangers came and went, and unless they were obtrusive with mouth or muscle, they attracted but little attention. A stranger in Dog Hole was a stran-

ger, unless he tried to mix in. If Herman Knox had not happened to stumble across an old acquaintance, or gone out on a voyage of discovery, it would have been a long time before he would have found his way into Madam Pharisee's, or become acquainted with the sports around town.

Yet there was another stranger in the city who had arrived on horseback only a day earlier who had made almost as good use of his time.

He was a quiet looking man too, with a mild gray eye that had not a bit of snap in it under ordinary circumstances, and his face, or as much of it as could be seen through his heavy bronze beard, was rather good-natured. No one set him down for a sport, or gave him more than a glance, until after he had wandered into the Crystal Palace.

There he made himself a reputation in no time.

As he was 'lying around loose,' not saying much to any one, and looked like a mild-mannered man that was lonesome, some one invited him to join a little party at poker. He accepted the invitation without either hesitation or eagerness; and in less than an hour the men of Dog Hole discovered that they had a chief in their midst—one of those wandering waifs that loiter through the land, spoiling the Egyptians as they go.

The game was not heavy—the players were not reckless; but the game brought out the relative strength of the parties concerned, and the stranger more than held his own against several of the coolest heads in Dog Hole. When they broke up at rather an early hour and without any particular reason, this man was a hundred or more ahead.

"Step up to the bar, gentlemen, and take your poison with Jones, Charley Jones of Cinnabar. Luck has been with me to-night and I've held all the cards; another time I'd have no show at all ag'in' the keeful playin' of the major here. Dog Hole seems a quiet, orderly sort of camp, just suiting a man like me, that don't say much. I reckon I'll stay here a little, an' see you all ag'in."

Then Mr. Jones, after the drinks all around, like a prudent man, who knew how such things were himself, went out, and left them to discuss his points. He would be more apt to strike a rustling game the next evening, than if he browsed around there all night.

He went straight back to the shanty at which he had obtained lodging, went to bed, and slept the sleep of one who had just crawled up from penury to opulence.

When he struck the town he had about fifteen dollars in his pocket.

As he closed his eyes he muttered:

"After all, short cards suits me better than mining, and if I'd stuck to them instead of stocks, I'd have saved my hundred thousand, and put about half a million to the good. So we go up, and—so we go down."

It was quite late, however, the next evening when he approached the Crystal Palace for he had stopped for a little game with his landlord, and as he was in something of a hurry he did not notice particularly two persons whom he brushed as he passed them. They were talking together in a low tone, and as though much interested, so that it was a wonder they noticed him at all.

But they did. Mr. Knox might be thinking ever so much of other things, but he would have an eye for what was going on around him. He had just got over the shock of the appearance of the man called Victor Page when, lo and behold Mr. Jones dropped down from the skies to give him another!

This, however, was not so unpleasant.

He took a long look at the broad shoulders that were vanishing through the door, and ejaculated:

"Good! My luck is certainly on the flood. Of all the men I would be unlikely to see he is the welcomest. Come on! We must follow him in. I wouldn't lose him for a thousand."

Hayes stared.

"You know him too, do you? Well, who don't you know? And they all seem an A1 lot in their line. They tell me he's the boss at poker; and the Crystal is the place where they invented that game. But aren't you afraid that your daughter will get lonesome? It's getting well on in the evening. I didn't know you would go the rounds when you started, or I wouldn't have taken the responsibility of piloting you out. She won't forgive me, I'm thinking."

"Oh, she is a girl of sense and has her instructions; while I live she is safe enough. They will not attack her until I am gone. Come! Lead on."

The young man was in for it, and, much against his will, entered the Crystal Palace. His idea had been to spend a few hours at Madam Pharisee's, and get back in time to be invited in to spend the rest of the evening at the Big Dam Hotel. It is true the accommodations there were primitive, but he would be with Kate, and that would be enough. This move bid fair to block all that; but there was no help for it, so in he went.

Jones was still at the bar, and as the two approached him there was no sign of recognition on his face. From the way they met even Hayes was inclined to believe that the two were perfect strangers. What was his surprise, then, to see them, after a little "backing and filling," settle down to a single handed game, in the most business looking way.

And the bystanders about this time were thrilled with the conviction that here was another chief, who, with anything like a favorable run of cards, could hold his own with the best of them.

To-night the cards were as bad as they well could be, and though making the best of them Hayes was satisfied that his vein of luck had deserted his friend, and that, if he kept on, Madam Pharisee's money would be apt to be transferred into a third pocket.

"You're too strong for me to-night, or else there's bad medicine for me here. Suppose we go over to the Big Dam, and try it by ourselves?"

At Herman Knox's proposition there was a murmur of dissent, and Tom Hayes looked as though he would willingly throw some one out of the window, but Jones had no objections.

"Just as you choose. Play you in a diving-bell or up in a balloon if you say so. When I get a streak you can't phase me till it runs out."

"I don't know about that. I'll fill up my buckskin and hit you again. When an ace flush won't take a pot it's time to touch for luck and try a new deal."

"That's so, pard, and I'm willing to give you a chance to make medicine in your own ranch; but if you hit me too hard maybe I'll want to come back to the Crystal again. How's that?"

"Give me a chance, and I'll do the same by you. Come along, Hayes; I don't want to cut you out—if this gentleman don't object."

"Fix it to suit yourselves; you won't hear me squeal."

The three left the room together, and though the conversation was heard by half a dozen or more, low though the words were, no one thought anything of it. The superstition of gamblers is proverbial, and as each of these had his reasons for what he did, only disappointment was felt. Tom Hayes was the only man who suspected anything; and he didn't know what to think, especially as nothing explanatory was said on the way.

But just in front of the hotel Knox halted.

"Go on in, Hayes; you can tell Kate that I will be back in a few minutes. I have something to say to Mr. Jones."

Hayes was nothing loth. He saw them walk off down the street, and then entered. Kate was waiting for her father, and he delivered the message. Then they talked for a time, but Herman Knox did not come back. They waited half an hour, but he did not make his appearance. In fact he never returned to the Big Dam Hotel at all!

CHAPTER VI.

AND HERMAN KNOX TOUCHES HARD-PAN.

"It strikes me you're paying a pretty steep price for an interview. Of course that's all stuff about bad medicine at the Crystal Palace, and such. I dropped to your game on the go-off. Allee-samee I reckon I'm too strong for you at draw, just now, anyhow. You've too much else on your mind. If I can help you, say it out."

As they turned away from the hotel, the card sharp opened the conversation, and that was the substance of what he said.

"I knew I could rely on you. I haven't forgotten you in the little year that has passed since I saw you. Didn't you save my life then, when I was all broken up with the fever, and a rib missing besides? I am better able to take care of myself now; and by the same token there's more danger for me now than then."

"You're a queer one. Thought you swore this country would never hold you again if you got safely out of it. For a little man you have an everlasting lot of trouble. What is it now?"

"The same as of old—or worse. It is a toss-up whether I am to live another twenty-four hours—though I take the chances. I think, perhaps, it was somewhere near an ending to-night, but pulling through as I did, I have hopes that I may throw them off with your help—if you are willing to aid me."

"Of course I am. I'm the Samaritan that never has anything to do but wander 'round and help the travelers through with the thieves. It pays big, of course. I'm out no end of a pile since I went back to 'Frisco with you. I'd have better staid away and invested in Tierra Roxo."

"I'm sorry to hear that; and if I live perhaps I can make it all right with you. Can you spare me your time and will you take the risk?"

"Time's of no particular account with me and a risk don't back me down worth a cent. What do you propose?"

"Go with me to the South. How far I cannot yet tell you, but you may count on six months' disappearance. If anything should happen, take Kate and continue the journey. She will guide you as well as I could."

"Another insurance policy; more outlaws; several Captain Skulls, and no Alabaster Jim to back us! All right; who cares? Count me in. When do we start?"

"You start at once, and I will leave in the morning, while Kate will stay here until the next stage starts for Gila."

"But it's a bad time for me to leave town. Why, I've just opened up a lead at the Crystal that would pan out a couple thousand inside the week. I'd like to have one more rake at them up there, anyhow. There is the major, for instance. It will make him sick if he don't get a shy at me before I leave town."

"The major and the rest will have to wait if you go into business for me. I haven't a doubt of you, mind you; but it wouldn't do. It's so easy to drop into a quarrel when one is playing, and then where would I be?"

"No worse off than you are now, I reckon?"

"Yes, but I would be, for I don't intend to leave you empty-handed. Sooner or later they will try to rob us again as they have done on the way here. Then, if they think they can bend Kate to their purpose, my life is not worth a farthing's purchase—it's hardly worth more than that now. I have a package that I will give you. You will never be suspected unless Madam P. claps eyes on you, which is not likely to happen, and you will take care of it until we join you at Gila."

"Um! About as safe as packing nitro-glycerine; but, no matter. When will you see my face again?"

"That is not so easy to answer, for I am going to take the back track a little, and see if I cannot manufacture a false trail. But, Kate will decide your movements. I will explain to her. If she seeks you out, follow her; if she does not, wait for me. Do you agree?"

"You heard me talk, and I'm not the kind that backs down from what I once say. I have a good horse—about the only thing left me when I struck this town. If you say so I'll mount and start. It's none of Dog Hole's business whether I go or stay; and if I can't throw them all off my track I'm a Dutchman. From the way you talk I suppose you have seen Varna lately."

"I have—she is here, and more dangerous than ever."

"I wish I could see her—or a chap that travels pretty near her road. But, it's dangerous now and I'll let it go. Any last orders? I'm ready for the road and won't waste much time fooling."

Mr. Jones spoke with a promptness that may have seemed surprising, but the truth was he had made up his mind beforehand to accept any proposed adventure, and, after that he was not likely to waste words or time. All that he wanted was to know exactly what was desired of him; then he was prepared to go about the business.

Some few words of final adieu and direction. Herman Knox spoke, and then in a furtive way, placed in his hands a package that he drew from a pocket on the inner side of his shirt.

"Remember, this goes to me, or to Kate in case of my death. Sooner than have Madam Pharisee or the outlaw Leaguers that are haunting my trail obtain it throw it into the river—sink it in the gulf of California."

"All right; I understand the platform, and you'll find me on it every hour in the day and every day in the week. I sabbe; and so good-by. If there ain't a fight before we get through with this I don't know beans when the bag's untied. We'll whoop 'em up lively, if there is, like we used to in Cinnabar."

"I believe you," answered Knox, holding out his hand. "But if anything happens to me look after Kate."

With this parting injunction they separated.

Their conference for the most part had been held on the outskirts of town, whither they had wandered. As it was possible that there might be prying eyes about, Herman Knox did not at once return to the Big Dam Hotel, since that would leave any spy that was on the trail at liberty to follow Jones; and that was what he did not want. In the side pocket of his coat he had a reliable pistol, and grasping this he wandered away almost at random, following the gulch by which they had been loitering.

He believed that he could take care of himself, and his erratic movements would be a puzzle to any one who noted them. At a pinch he could show wonderful courage.

Herman Knox, however, was m'staken. Either his ear was less acute, or some one had a lighter step than he had bargained for. As he went on a form flitted nearer and nearer to him, until it seemed scarcely more than an arm's length away.

He heard the faint dropping of feet, then, and wheeled suddenly; but the man had taken a leaf out of Knox's book, and as the latter turned he raised his coat-skirt and fired straight through the cloth.

There was the muffled sound of a faint report, Knox threw up his hands and pitched heavily to the ground. That was the reason he left his daughter and Tom Hayes to wait in vain.

CHAPTER VII.

TOM HAYES FINDS A SPOTCH OF BLOOD, AND NOTHING ELSE.

WHEN Herman Knox fell there was the sound of one short, weird laugh, and then his assailant sprung lightly forward and knelt by his side.

"I reckoned I'd fall heir to his pack-load of pewter, and this time I won't miss it."

He dropped his hand upon the breast of the fallen man, who was breathing but unconscious and it touched a protruding bundle, that might be a pocket-book well filled, or might be a pack-age of papers.

At the same time he looked up with a quick, startled glance. There was no sound—at least that would have been audible to any ordinary ear, but instinct said that some one was approaching.

"By heavens! they've been a-watchin' me all the time, but I'll beat 'em yet."

He tore the package from its resting-place and gave a great bound, just as a harsh voice sternly commanded:

"Hands up! No foolishness er yer a dead man."

The order came too late, since the decision to run the chances had already been made. Before the words were fairly spoken the assassin vanished in the darkness.

Two men dashed after him, while two others took his place by the side of Herman Knox and began turning his pockets out with methodical rapidity.

"We war just in time, Cap," said the one whose fingers were doing the exploration. "Accommodatin' in him to drop our man fur us; but kinder dangerous to use a shootin'-iron right hyer in town. Hyer's his watch, an' his pocket-book, an' his loose change, an' his shootin' irons, an' a jack-knife. Ef yer think he's any more movables search him yerself."

"No papers?"

"Nary a paper! that's his hull outfit; an' I ain't durned fool enough to want to linger round hyer; I heer some one comin' now an' it's time to git. We'd better throw him inter ther gulch to put him outen ther way ov the browsin' fools ez will poke the'r noses whar they hadn't orter. Take hold an' over he goes."

The man seized the body of Herman Knox by the shoulders, while his companion caught an ankle in each hand. They raised the body and swung it between them.

"One, two, three and up she goes!"

So the coarser villain began to facetiously remark, and then, without warning, he dropped his half of the dismal burden and sprung away without even uttering a warning cry.

The other lingered a second longer to roll Herman Knox over the edge of the gulch, and then, without waiting to hear the body go crashing downward, he too fled away from the spot, with a pistol bullet whistling over his head, and the voices of three or four excited men sounding in his ears. Their movements had been noted and the time had come to either fight or run. Without hesitation they chose the latter.

By the merest chance the two robbers had been interrupted in their operations by men who had honest nerve, and plenty of it. As they dashed up to the spot one of them spied the revolver of Herman Knox and picked it up. He had been unarmed before, and now he joined in the chase with redoubled zest, though it turned out to be fruitless. The two supposed assassins ran straight into town, and then disappeared in spite of the fact that several shots, fired pretty much at random, had raised a limited alarm.

Tom Hayes was one of those who was out in the street.

When Herman Knox did not return his daughter began to express her uneasiness. It was very easy for her to imagine that something had happened, and at length she tried to impress Hayes with the same idea.

Although he had heard enough to convince him that there were some grounds for disquiet, he was not seriously alarmed. It seemed more than likely that the two had reconsidered their intentions, and returned to the Crystal Palace, and he offered to go and see if such was the case.

In that way it happened that he heard pistol-shots and the steps of rapidly running men, and came up just as the pursuers had decided that they were totally at fault.

"What's all this?" he asked, his own hand on his revolver.

"Bloody murder, I reckon, and we were after the chaps, hot-foot, but we lost 'em somewhere round hyer. You ain't seen two men go by, hev you?"

"Two men? No. Who were they, and who have they killed?"

"Thet's more ner we know. We've been in town on a quiet leetle jamboree, an' war goin' out ter camp ag'in, an' out by ther gulch, thar, two men war jist swingin' a third off. We give a yell an' a shot, an' they dropped him an' ske-daddled. Hyer's a shooter I picked up as we kin along by. D'yer know it?"

They were right under the lamp of a saloon,

and the man held up the revolver and looked at it sharply as he spoke.

"'Pears ter me there's some writin' scratched on ther handle. Kin you make it out?"

Tom Hayes snatched it out of his hand.

"Good Heaven!" he exclaimed. "The man was Herman Knox. This is my revolver. I loaned it to him this very evening, because his own were a size too large to fit his pockets. There's been foul play, and something has happened to him. Quick! Show me the spot. He may not be dead."

He started up into anxious life as he spoke, and would have moved off at once had not one of them placed himself directly in front of him.

"Hold on there a minute, my friend. That may all be a squar' story, but afore you go any furder we'd like to know who *you* be. We didn't see whar you kin from, an' all we know are thet you want to claim ther shooter an' git. Yer don't git a step furder afore yer eggsplain."

The suspicion seemed natural enough to all except Hayes himself; and him it maddened. He would not have answered a word, but as the man spoke several revolvers rose to a level with his head, and another of the party growled:

"An' don't yer try no nonsense with that pepper-box yer fingerin'. We've got you hyer, an' don't you furgit it."

"Don't be fools, men! I'm Tom Hayes, deputy sheriff, and the best known man in Dog Hole. As you are strangers here I ought to arrest you; but I believe your story, and you had better believe mine. Ask them in the saloon here, if you choose; and when we get to the Big Dam they'll tell you I only left there a moment ago. Now come on. It may cost Knox his life for us to stand jabbering here."

"You're tellin' ther truth; I kin tell it in yer eye, young man, an' there's lots ov sense in what yer say; but, yer see, we didn't think ov anything but catchin' ther cusses that hed laid him out. Kim along, and we'll show the spot whar the murder war done."

With a horror that was gradually rising, Hayes followed, asking now and then a question as they went along.

"You saw them, did you? What sort of men were they? How was the thing done? Did you hear the noise of any affray?"

"Yes, we see 'em sure enough; but it war so dark I wouldn't swear to 'em ag'in, ef I was to see 'em. One war a middlin' sort of a feller, an' the other a right smart sprinklin' of a good-sized chap. I wouldn't be too sure either, but a leetle bit afore we got there we thought we heard ther crack ov a pistol! an' that's what made us keep our eyes open. Hyer's ther spot now; an' right hyer is whar they rolled him over."

There were no traces of a fray. Although it was night it would not have been hard to see if there had been anything like a prolonged struggle. They leaned over the edge and looked down into the shadow of the gulch, but heard no groan nor movement below.

Then, just as they were going to descend and explore the dark recesses of the gulch, they were joined by a man with a lantern. He held it low down; and all halted and gazed at one spot. On the grass there was a red splotch of blood; and a little trail of it led to the brink. Without a doubt, now, Herman Knox had been very hard hit.

The bank was steep enough, and here and there protruding rocks furnished a foothold, and the wonder was that the body had not lodged against one of the boulders.

It had not, for there was no sign of it.

At the bottom there was another splotch of blood—and that was all.

"Cusses on our fool heads!" exclaimed the man who had picked up the revolver. "While we war howlin' round town on a goose chase ther gang slipped back an' stole ther corpus. They're no slouches, they ain't, an' they hev ther sand. That's ther last you'll hear ov that frolic, and don't you furgit it."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LEAGUE STOP THE WRONG MAN; AND KATE KNOWS BETTER.

Of the two men who lingered to strip the body of Herman Knox, one was the Victor Page who had entered Madam Pharisee's just after Knox had come out. This murder was certainly none of his planning, though he was so swift to take advantage of it after it was done. In fact, unless the wallet should reveal some important secret, he was angry enough, and two of his comrades, under his orders, had hastened away in pursuit of the man who had blocked their game.

They were fleet on their feet, but the man in advance was fleetier, and knew the lay of the town thoroughly, since they lost him among a lot of shanties, any one of whose inhabitants would probably have willingly shielded a murderer—for a consideration. About the same time they heard the noise made by the men who were just starting in on the pursuit of Victor Page, and concluded it was time to look out for themselves. They gave up the pursuit and walked hastily away.

Then chance befriended them when it was too late. Almost to a certainty they saw the man

of whom they had been in search enter the house of Madam Pharisee.

They passed on however, and then suddenly met Victor Page, who was walking alone and very unconcernedly.

He listened to what they had to tell him with compressed lips.

"So he was *her* agent?" he said. "Ah! I should have known it. But, who is he? We have the advantage of him, for he is the responsible party, and if he fired the shot no one would believe that he did not rifle the pockets afterward. Perhaps he did; we must find out. He can't stay there forever, and when he comes out we must go for him. We can watch in front, and Jack can go around and see that he don't get away by the rear."

They waited some time in front but the door did not reopen. The man in the rear, however, finally saw the identical party come through a back door and mount a mustang that was led out for him. He sprung lightly into the saddle and at an easy lope swept around to the front.

As he passed a window shutter opened and a female face appeared.

"Take care of yourself, and let me hear how you succeed!" exclaimed this watcher, and the horseman waved his hand with a light laugh and would have swept on had not two men sprung right out in his track, catching at his reins. He came so rapidly and unexpectedly that no one had time to draw a weapon, and he would undoubtedly have slipped by altogether, if the attention of Page and his ally had not been attracted by the opening of the window.

They acted without any particular forethought; and principally to obtain a nearer view of the man. In consequence of their own after connection with the affair they hardly dared attempt his arrest.

Page's fingers just slipped clear of the reins, for the horse stopped short as if shot and then reared high in air, striking viciously with his front feet as though he would cut the assailant down.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the man on horseback. "Yer on ther trail, are ye, Captain Page? Take a leetle advice from this rooster, an' stay out. I kin scoop yer both, but we're on so much ther same lay it would seem like dog eatin' dog. No, I wouldn't make no rumpus hyer, an' I wouldn't draw no weepins. You hear me, say?"

"And you, listen to us. You are on the wrong side in this affair, and the Red League gives you warning. We are stronger than the woman who is working against us, and however we may spare her, we won't leave a grease-spot of you. A wink from us and the law does its duty."

"Law be hanged!"

The equestrian snapped his fingers and gave a whistle, and in an instant his mustang seemed transformed into a demon. He executed a half-wheel and let go his hind feet at the man who was just drawing a pistol from his belt, and then sprung at Victor Page.

Both men went down in a flash, though neither was seriously injured.

When they rose again the horseman had vanished.

Boiling with rage though he was, the man could not help giving vent to a coarse laugh.

"We struck it rich when we got onto *that* lead, captain. I don't want no more o' him in mine unless I'm lookin' over the top of a navy six, with ther hammer drawed."

"It was not he, curse him! It was the fiend of a horse. But who was he? Do you know him? He is no fool, either."

"Yer right he ain't, tho' I ain't so sure ez I'm on ther right string. I'd back it fur a small stake, tho', that it's ther Tough from Tucson, es ther boys at San Diego called him. Ef it is you'll find him a hair-pin that don't drop out. But how did he git hyer?"

"San Diego, you say? Then he's an old friend of Varna's. We have made no mistake, though I never heard of him before."

"Well, ef it's Lucky Luke he's a sport from the ground up; not much to look at, but an awful one to go. What's their next move now?"

"Adjourn from here now. I will go on and find out what I can. If the man is dead—and there was no doubt about it—the only chance left is with the girl. If she knows nothing, the secret, if there was one, is either dead or in the keeping of Madam Pharisee. She could help us with the girl if she would, but unless we can bend her stubborn will she will use her strength for herself alone. I expect we are about to have a fight fer it, sister mine, so look out for yourself."

The latter part of this was more in the nature of a soliloquy than an address to his companion. He looked up at the window, the shutter of which was now closed, and shook his fist, frowning darkly. Then he turned, going on his way alone, while the other, seeming to understand what he was to do, went around the house in search of his comrade, who had not yet made his appearance.

Meantime Hayes, having joined in an unsuccessful search for the missing body of Herman

Knox, at length went slowly back to Kate, to tell her his mournful news.

He wanted to break it to her gently, yet did not know how.

His face did it for him.

"You have something bad to tell, and you are afraid. Do not hesitate. I have imagined so much of evil that I am prepared for the reality. My father—what of him? Tell me the whole truth, without mincing it."

"The whole truth—the worst at once?"

"Yes."

"He is dead, then. Beyond a doubt he is dead, though the man that killed him doubled on the pursuers, who saw him rifling the body, and returning, carried it away. It is useless to look further to-night, though they have not given up the search. In the morning there are men here who can take the trail, and run it to the end. They shall. Meantime trust me and use me as your friend. Whatever man can do I will do for you."

He talked on, fearing almost to stop lest the flood-gate of her tears should open. Who could comfort her when once she realized her loss and gave way to her despair?

He did not know her, or appreciate the school in which she had been raised.

"I do not believe it!" she said. "He knows me and trusts me. He has simply gone on his way, and will wait in due time for me to join him. Two such men as he and Pierre Redette could hold their own against a dozen."

"Who did you say—Redette?"

"Yes; Jones, if you prefer it."

"Ah, it is more than likely he was but a decoy to lead your father into danger—even if his hand did not fire the fatal shot."

"It is false! I would trust him with my life—as I have done in the past. I will not believe you, though no doubt you think you speak the truth. I thank you for your offer, and if it were possible I would rely on you, but as it is I must depend upon myself alone. The time may come, however, and if it does I shall not hesitate to remind you of your kind offer."

"But how else can you explain the disappearance of this wandering gambler, in whom you profess to have such confidence?"

Kate was a true woman, and Tom Hayes should have known enough about womankind not to have asked such a question, nor to have hinted at an appeal to logic.

"I don't want to explain it," she answered, hotly. "What business is it of mine? But, this I can say—that if any harm has befallen him, it was not Pierre Redette's hand that struck the blow, but that of one who will seek me next."

When nothing was known of Herman Knox, Kate was anxiously anticipating the worst. Now that every one else believed that the worst had befallen him, she refused to be convinced. Yet Tom Hayes was better satisfied to leave her thus than in tears, though he himself felt hopeless.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN IN THE MASK.

The disappearance of Herman Knox made some little stir in Dog Hole—more than it would have done a year or two before, when the town was a newly-found camp, and "a man for breakfast" was no unusual thing.

The days of lawlessness were supposed to be pretty well over now, and though there were brawls, and drunken carousals, and the like, homicide pure and simple would be apt to meet with ready punishment.

In addition, Kate excited the sympathy of the people, who were already moved by the mystery of the thing and its boldness. The sudden and complete disappearance of the poker chief told against him, and the majority took the view of it that Tom Hayes did. It had leaked out that the two men had known each other before, and the most rational explanation was that the campers had put themselves outside of enough fire-water to enable them to see double. The two men had some grounds of quarrel between them and had wandered out discussing them, until in a sudden heat, the thing was done.

Daylight brought no new developments, and Kate Knox waited through the day with a nervousness that she could not shake off, boldly as she had spoken to Hayes. She visited the spot with him in the morning, but could make little out of the faint though ghastly traces that remained.

The presence of the young man had its unpleasant as well as its reassuring effect. He was an officer of the law as well as a personal friend, and he asked entirely too many questions. There were some of them that she could not answer, and some of them that she dared not. If it had been any one else but Kate she would have had to answer whether she would or no, but just now there was a certain glamour before the eyes of deputy Hayes, so that there were some things that he could not see with his usual clearness.

It was a relief to her when she knew that he had ridden out of town in search of a clew to the whereabouts of Mr. Jones. She wanted to be by herself.

She had no fear of personal danger when, about sun-down, she found that her wandering feet had brought her, without any previous determination, to the side of the gulch, a little below the scene of the murder. At all times, now, she carried a revolver about her, and she knew very well how to use it.

She had a decision to make, too. The stage, or the conveyance which rejoiced in that name, she had found out was to start southward the next morning, and the question was whether she should fulfill her father's last injunctions.

She rather thought that she would, although she knew it would seem like madness to Hayes, and others, since she could not altogether explain to him her reasons.

She thought it all over and decided fully to go. Then she arose from the little bank, upon which she had been seated, and at once became conscious that she was not alone.

Standing face to face with her was a man, and as she looked up she understood that he was a foe.

He had on a red mask.

Over his shoulders, to the rear a little, there were two more red masks.

"Good-evening, miss," said the leader. "You are in no end of trouble, and we have been trying hard to think how you could be helped, and here you've put it right in our hands. You must excuse us for not showing out; but there are ulterior reasons, as you will find out after a little further conversation, why we should not risk ourselves even in your hands."

"That will do, sir," answered Kate, bravely. "Honest men don't hide their faces; and, besides, I have heard of the Red League, and cannot expect anything at their hands but treachery and loss."

"You are mistaken, miss. We will deal honestly and squarely with you, as we would have done by your father. I see he has told you something about us; but I doubt if he dared tell you the whole truth."

"I know enough. You need explain no further. A gang of cutthroat thieves and assassins; you fastened yourselves upon him as your prey; and having put him out of the way you come to me, thinking either to frighten or to dupe me. You can do neither. Stand aside, and let me pass."

"Not so fast. Those are pretty strong charges; but, look you how they will melt away before the honest truth. Your father, long ago, joined us, knowing that we were a political organization with Mexico as our final scene of operations. We sent him to Sonora, as perhaps you may believe, on a mission; and he forgot his duty and his oath, using our funds and influence to serve his private ends. For years we lost the track of him, and then we were willing to overlook all and receive him back into fellowship, if he shared with us the profits of his speculations. We care nothing about the private fortune that is really forfeit by the terms of membership, but we demand the rights of the League. He is gone now, and we come to you. Place yourself in our hands, and we guarantee you protection, and the half of whatever may be the hidden treasure."

How much of this story was true?

Kate might have been puzzled to tell, for somewhere in or about it she recognized a basis of fact. It was the offer of protection that caused her to flame out in wrath.

"You cowards, you! Do you think I am an utter idiot because I am a girl and alone? You protect me! Yes, with such protection as you gave my father last night. You have doubtless murdered him and his friend, because they would not speak; and now you come to me, thinking to beguile me. I know all and I will not speak; I am only a girl, but I am a wise one. Harm me if you dare!"

The man remained motionless. His red mask protected his features and Kate could not tell how deeply her shafts had gone home, but she saw that the two men behind him moved uneasily, glancing over their shoulders first and then at her. She half thought they were gathering for a rush.

"A minute more, my dear, before you decide. There is also a woman in this case—a certain Madam Pharisee, as she is called here, though known elsewhere as Varna Page. She was your father's implacable foe, as she will be yours. It would be worth your fortune to be saved from her. It was her hand that last night struck—"

"Hold, right there! Show your hand! I reject you and your offers. What next?"

"This, then," exclaimed the man in the mask, at last losing his temper. "A bird, you know, that can sing and won't sing must be made to sing."

He waved his hand and the two men sprung forward.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT A WOMAN CAN DO.

"WE offered you freedom, wealth and protection," continued the man in the mask, "and you refused. We play no longer; let us see whether the opposites will make you speak."

"Hardly!" answered Kate, and backward she sprung, at the same time whipping out

the little revolver that hung ready to her hand.

She did not aim at her would-be assailants, either; but held the pistol straight at the leader, who saw that the deadly tube fairly covered his breast.

"Hold!" he shouted, and the rush was checked.

"Put up that weapon, girl! Resistance is folly, for whatever you may do—and the chances are a thousand to one that a bullet of that size would harm no one—you are bargaining for certain death, and in spite of yourself I would save you. If you once pull the trigger, men nor angels could do it, though."

"Ha! ha! You weaken when it comes to a question of certain death! Whether my weapon kills or not, a shot would bring aid; and once more on the track of the slayers of last night, the men of Dog Hole would never rest until they hung them. I prefer saving you for the rope or my finger would ere this have tightened on the trigger. I am a woman, and shudder at the thought of turning executioner."

She turned her hand a trifle as she spoke, and fired a shot in the air. Then recocking the weapon, she brought it down again toward the Red Leaguer's breast.

She was quick and certain; yet a shade too late.

Just then the man flung himself forward, falling flat on his face, while one of his allies flung the noose of a short lasso that he had been stealthily handling.

The loop settled down over her shoulders and then tightened, pinioning her arms tightly to her side. If she had not suddenly thrown her weight backward she would have been drawn from her feet. She was in the toils, and the three were closing around her.

"Hasten now! That shot may be heard and too much time has been lost, anyhow. A man who reasons with a woman is a fool. Here come the horses; into the saddle with her!"

Up from the ground sprung the masked chief, and behind him there sounded the thud of horses' hoofs; but, just as he caught the hands of Kate, which still grasped the pistol, he saw a million stars and dropped prone upon the ground again.

Crack! crack! The loaded stock of a heavy riding whip fell twice, and would have fallen again if the third man had not skipped nimbly out of the way. Then the whip was cast aside, and the shining barrel of a revolver dropped upon the level of his head.

"Away with you now!" exclaimed the newcomer, a veiled woman on horseback, "unless you want this!"

"Madam Pharisee!" said the man, and fell back, while Kate joyfully sprung to the side of her new ally.

"Up with you!" said the woman, and Kate, flinging off the now loosened loop, sprung up behind her.

"I was just in time. Cling tight and I will have you at the Big Dam in no time. The villains would have made short work of you. The next time follow the good old rule: Shoot first and talk afterward. Tom Hayes will be wild when he hears about this."

There was something of question in the woman's tone and Kate answered it promptly.

"He need not hear of it; and he shall not, so far as I am concerned. He is a friend of my father's to be sure, but that counts for nothing. I must leave here at once; and if he knew of this it would only be another reason why he should detain me."

"But would you leave here while still uncertain of your father's fate?"

"I must. But how can I thank you for what you have done? You are very brave. Not one woman in a thousand could have done as much."

"Ha, ha! It was nothing. If you really would thank me say nothing of my share in this, and go on your way as soon as may be. It is not likely that we could ever be friends; and it would be better if we never met again, since we might be foes."

"Ah!"

They had swept away from the little bend in which a tragedy had so nearly been enacted and were now at the outskirts of the town. It was but a few steps at best to the Big Dam. As she spoke Kate sprung to the ground.

"I am sorry; but so it is fated, I suppose. I had hoped that you had come to my aid as one brave woman for another, but I see I was mistaken. You had an object of your own even in that. I wish I dared say more now, but I am not altogether my own master. Some day, perhaps, there can be peace and more than peace between us. As yet I know not the whole truth, but I can suspect a great deal, that has gone far to sadden my life. For the present farewell."

Kate turned away as she spoke, and without answer Madam Pharisee shot by her, with her head bent low. In one way or another the words of the girl had cut her more than she cared to show.

Meantime Tom Hayes had returned, and was in some concern for the wanderer. He brought some slight grains of intelligence which he was

anxious to tell, as much because it seemed to show that his judgment had not been at fault, as for the intelligence that was to be conveyed.

No one seemed to know what had become of Kate, and so he started out to seek for her. He hardly knew in what frame of mind she might be, but he guessed that she would visit the scene of the affair again, and so turned his steps in that direction.

The event proved that he was right, for he met her just after her parting with Madam Pharisee. Of course he knew her at once, though she was hurrying along with head bent down, and did not notice him in the thickening darkness.

"How impudent! What might not have happened to you—and all for nothing? You must promise me not to do so again, at least for the present."

She gave a start at hearing his voice. She had forgotten his existence; and was thinking of Madam Pharisee.

"Why? Oh, yes, I—I understand. No, I was taking a last look. I think I had better go, you understand."

"No, I do not understand. Where would you go to? I take it that there are no near relatives to whom you could turn; and I am certain that nowhere else have you warmer friends. Stay here, for the present—of course you will. I will unearth this mystery yet if mystery it be. I think that there can be no doubt now of the guilt of this man whom you so strangely refuse to believe to be untrustworthy. He was seen last night making his way from the gulch. Such a man cannot long evade pursuit. He is of too marked appearance. When he is taken he will have a chance to exclaim; but the way it looks now I doubt if men or angels could clear him."

"Then men and angels are worth little in bringing out the truth. You may think I take all this coolly. I do; and it is because I do not believe in the story at all. This man whom you choose to brand as a murderer has stood with us before in the most desperate straits, and he would do it again. Until I know that he is dead I shall not lose all hope."

"It is a good thing that the course of justice has little to do with prejudice or opinion, and a great deal with facts. Let this go. If the end of it should be that you are right no one will be happier than I. In truth, there is a possibility, and more than a possibility that things are so. Let us imagine that they are; and yet I would have you prepared for the worst."

"And meantime can you tell me who is Madam Pharisee?"

She had hopes, you see, and so refused to dwell upon the dismal side of the question longer than was necessary, and her mind came swinging back to the woman she had so unexpectedly met and so strangely parted from.

The question was a surprise to Hayes, though he at once jumped to the conclusion that in some way Kate had heard of the game of faro of the preceding night, and was putting two and two together.

"Has any one been carrying tales to you about her? If they have, you are on the wrong trail. It is true that your father was a winner there, last night; but the madam is no Injun giver. She wins and loses on the square, and that is the end of it. When we left there were a dozen there yet who remained for some hours. You needn't suspect her."

"I was not thinking of that; I only asked to learn something about her."

So Hayes gave her a sketch of the madam, who had been in Dog Hole for some months, though how she came to settle there he knew not. She was erratic in her movements, and had flourished in other camps and towns, and was said to be wealthy. And so he went on, the girl walking by his side and listening, he only too glad to interest her. She said no more to him about leaving Dog Hole, and he was certain that she had abandoned the idea. When he took leave it was with a promise to see her on the following day; but the day lengthened into weeks before he saw her again, and it was miles away from Dog Hole.

CHAPTER XI.

"HONEST FRANK" STRIKES HARD-PAN.

SOME weeks have elapsed, and the scene has changed to another camp in the still wilder Arizona land, and down by the Gila river, not so very far from its confluence with the Colorado. "Honest Frank," as some of the miners had dubbed him, was seeking his lair in no very cheerful mood.

He had come with the rush, and though none of the three thousand so hastily gathered together were doing much, it seemed to him that he was doing worst of all.

When a man is trying to be honest, yet scarcely knows how, and finds his stock of funds nearly exhausted, his meal-sack empty, credit an unheard-of thing, and no immediate prospect of a strike, he is apt to take the gloomiest view possible of the workings of Providence, and his own future.

So Honest Frank trudged out from Gila City with empty pockets and a very slender stock of necessaries on his shoulder.

"Dog-gone it, old man," he muttered to himself. "It looks as though you'd made a mistake. All the luck seems to be with them sinners, an' the'r havin' a rustlin' old time. Ef I hadn't swore off I might be a-holdin' my own with them best on 'em, 'stead o' wastin' myself to a grease-spot in that sand-hole, 'thout findin' nary a sign ov a color. Sot down, Frank, me son, an' consider. It looks as though this deal war about over."

He dropped the sack doggedly from his shoulder and seated himself just where he had halted. It was not because he was so tired as to need immediate rest, nor that his journey was so long that it had to be taken in two sections. It was simply that he was at war with himself, and halted to give the opposing battalions time to form.

"It don't seem to be nary use. I've give it a fair trial, an' ther thing don't seem to work fur a cent. Hed I better jump ther game while I've got a shoestring left, or keep it up till ther bottom drops clean out? It seems like a dream, this findin' one's self shoal on ther bar. I might a-known it though. My luck don't run along when I travels on ther square. It's all hard work, an' slim grub. I found that out years ago."

He was a fine-looking fellow, too, despite his air of despondency. Tall, broad-shouldered, naturally quick in his motions, and with eyes that were full of smoldering fire, only waiting to burst into a flame. He had struck back the brim of his sombrero from his broad forehead, and with his chin resting on his hands, sat gazing at nothing in particular, but with his brow wrinkled in deep thought.

"Still, I ain't dead gone broke, an' I ain't one of the kind to draw out till the last dime's out and I have a sight for my money. That's the game I'll play now. I'll stick to my sand-bar as long as the grub lasts. Then, if there's no sign, I'll wake up some of these no-account galoots that hev been eetchin' to crawl over Honest Frank."

He raised himself, as he spoke, and felt for his sack.

Crack!

Down on his head there fell a terrific blow, one that would have brained an ordinary man, and down he dropped, quicker than if he had been shot, with the faintest of low moans, and a little quivering, convulsive movement of the limbs.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a hoarse, brutal laugh, and over him stood three men, scowling, blear-eyed, bloated in the face, yet with forms that indicated brute strength for anything.

"Yer ortn't ter hit ser hard, Ben; he's a stiff, fer sure," said one of the ruffians, kneeling by the fallen man.

"Bah! Don't git sick on ther stomjack, Baby, at sight of a leetle red water. Go through his pockets first, and talk-e-talk afterward. I've seen lots of dust lost 'cause parties fooled round till some one come along that was too big to mount."

"Right you are!" added the third, as, stooping down, he proceeded to "go through" the pockets of the fallen man, who lay motionless, as a log, with a certain rapidity that bespoke long practice.

An exclamation of disgust burst from his lips as he rose again to his feet, holding a limp and evidently empty buckskin bag.

"Of all ding-donged games I ever did help set up, this takes ther rag. Bag an' all wouldn't buy a drink at old Mike's. He's a fraud, an' don't yer furtit it. He deserves all he gits, goin' round to fool sich hard-workin', reliable men as we be!"

"What?" exclaimed the one addressed as Ben. "It can't be! Hyar! Let me see him. He's got a belt, somewhar. I know it, fur that's nothin' hid anywhar's 'round ther galoot's shanty."

"I tell yer he's a sell. Ef yer don't b'lieve me, try him yerself."

The leader of the gang seemed not to have abandoned all hope, for he did kneel down, and the search that he made was both thorough and systematic; but, all the same, the truth was the truth and nothing else. Not a dime, in coin or dust, was to reward them.

"Well, I swear! Rock me ter sleep, mother, an' put me in my leetle bed. This is the quisiest lay three fool sharks ever invented. It won't pay fur ther wear an' tear o' shoe-leather, trampin' out from town. Why, dog-gone him, I b'lieve he's bu'sted! An' him a-workin' right along, day in an' day out, an' lettin' on ter be so square an' honest he wouldn't come inside of old Mike's, let alone take a drink with ther boys. Why, you'd think he'd millions, from ther style he put on! Thet comes from yer cus-sed honesty. I never did trust it furder than you could sling a bull by ther tail."

The three looked commiseratingly at each other. The disappointment seemed too great for even a smile.

"All right! We'll know better next time, an' won't spend a week stagglin' ther nibs of a whelp that's got less ov ther ore than we hev. Pick up his grub-sack an' toddle."

"But, what'll we do with him?" asked Baby, gazing appealingly at his leader.

"Cut his throat an' go on fur ther next snap. He's just ther kind ov a chep that squeals ther loudest when he comes 'rounl an' finds no harm done. An' he'd be an awkward man to hev loose on ther trail ef he meant business. He don't hev no irons with him now, but ef I ain't mistook them snappin' black eyes knows how ter look along a thing with a hole in it. Yer knife, Baby; an' put an' extra button-hole in his shirt front."

"Hanged if I do!" answered Baby, sulkily. "Work yer own button holes! I didn't go inter this ter cut a man's throat fer three cents; an' ef that's ther tin-pot sorter game you play, you ken do yer own dealin'."

The Baby, as he was styled, in default of any other name, scarcely looked as radically vicious as his two companions. He had great thews and sinews, and a forehead as disproportionately low as his jaw was large. His face bore traces of recent dissipation, and his piggish little eyes were beginning to have a wolfish gleam; but somehow if one outside had been watching him he would have been apt to think of old dog Tray, that was ruined by bad company. At his open revolt the leader with a frown drew his own knife, and made a step toward him.

"Don't you try any nonsense on me, Ben Blake; I kin mash yer with one clip; an' I'll do it ther first sign ov a cross game. You can't scare me, an' yer ought ter know it."

The Baby doubled his fists and watched the movements of Blake warily, though without any signs of alarm.

"You infernal idiot! who's goin' to bother with you? I'd have your heart out before you could put your big paws up if I was after it, but we three ain't goin' to quarrel. I'm only goin' ter tone yer nerves up a bit, showin' how sich things orter be done."

With his knife in his hand and an unmistakable look of determination in his face, Ben Blake moved toward the prostrate Frank, and raised the steel. If not already dead the life of the honest miner was scarcely worth a penny.

The Baby turned away; the third man, with the sack on his shoulder, stood eying the scene with a grin of savage curiosity on his face. For a second there was a breathless silence.

Then on the cool evening air there fell a harsh jarring sound, faint though it was, as if the hammers of two revolvers were thrust back; and a voice, delicate yet stern, broke in:

"Hold there; what would you do? Try it if you dare. You, Ben Blake, and you, Burro Bill, I sha'n't speak twice; away with you, before I pull trigger!"

They gave a startled look.

Right in front of them stood a womanly figure, tall, graceful, and clad in flowing black. In each outstretched hand was held a leveled revolver with the hammer back, while her eyes flashed with stern determination.

"Madam Pharissee!" exclaimed Blake, with a snarled oath, and hastily his left hand dropped to his waist. Even he, the reckless desperado, scarcely cared to face those pointed pistols with nothing but a knife in his hand.

"You know me then. So much the better. Leave; levant; vamoose; be off with you! It is well you had not finished your bloody work or I should have slain you where you stood. Go, before my fingers tighten on the triggers."

There was no longer any hesitation.

"Don't give us away or we'll lay for him some time when you and your revolvers ain't quite so handy. It'll be his life or ounr; an' I guess you know how that'll end."

With these parting words the three slouched heavily away; and Burro Bill carried with him the fruits of the fray, in the shape of Honest Frank's sack of provisions.

As the last sounds of the retreating footsteps died away, the strange woman knelt by the side of the prostrate man, coolly returning her revolvers to the belt around her waist.

With a deft movement of her fingers she examined his head.

"Nothing worse here than a rough knock. He will be around again in a minute or two, and just in frame for business."

From a little flask she moistened his lips with whisky, and waited patiently.

The delay was not long. The eyelids opened, color came back with a rush, and with strange suddenness he sat bolt upright, placing his hand to his wounded head.

Then the woman spoke:

"Frank Harper, I have been looking for you. I want you."

CHAPTER XII.

MADAM PHARISEE TAKES A PARTNER.

At the sound of the woman's voice the miner seemed to make a desperate effort to recover his wool-gathering wits; and with very fair success.

"So do I," he answered, with all the cheerfulness possible on such a lugubrious occasion; "I reckon I'm coming now. What's wrong?"

He did not know yet what had happened; but the dull, aching pain caused him to put his hand to his head—when he took it away it was red and wet.

"Say, Hello!" he added. "Did you do it?

I reckon not. Don't think ther's enough heft in yer shoulder."

"Perhaps you are right there. It would take a harder blow than I could strike, even with a club to knock a man of your stamina senseless. No; but I was just in time to prevent the thing from being worse. The man had his knife at your throat when I drew on him with this. He levanted then and I gave you a taste of this. Perhaps you had better swallow a few drops more; I judge you are none too strong as yet."

First she touched the hilt of one of the revolvers in her belt; then she shook the little flask from which she had moistened his lips.

He held out his hand with a twinkle in his eye.

"It's a year to a day since I struggled with the fire-water, an' I didn't h'ist it very lively then. Ah! that's the prime stuff. Thankee: I'm a new man; an', miss, er madam, ef ther's ary way Frank Harper kin serve you, drop the hint, and you'll find him on hand."

He rose to his feet now and looked around.

The sack which contained all his worldly wealth, save clothes and tools, was missing. It was not very valuable, to be sure; but without it, it was pretty certain that he would go supperless to such bed as he had, and the chances for breakfast were just about as slender.

"You can serve me now," answered the woman, in a clear, bell-like voice.

"The world is going none too well with you, but I can tell that you are a man of nerve and skill, and without any nonsense. Such a man I want. One who will obey orders, respect confidence, and stay with me to the last. For such service I will pay a man well; and, perhaps, be able to put him in a position where he will strike it richer than any of the dupes that have been lured here to toil and starve."

"You're reaching very near where I live, madam. I've been one of the dupes, and I stuck for all I was worth. The sand's all run out, now; the box upset, an' I'm off for a new lay. If you can show somethin' pleasant an' profitable, count me in. If not, I'll set up on my own hook. I've got to do somethin', mighty sudden."

"How pleasant it will be depends. There may be a good deal of danger, I warn you beforehand—lots of shooting, and all that—but after we get out of this I won't ask you to go anywhere that I don't lead. And I don't think that there's any woman has more nerve than Frank Harper. How is it?"

"Always right, madam; but I ain't used to being bossed, you see, an' I'm an unsart'in man. Go a leetle furder, an' perhaps you'll find some one as'll suit you better."

"No; if I explored every camp from here to Oregon I could find no man that would suit me better, if I had your hand and word. Give me them and name your own terms. I tell you, you are certain of your pay; and if I meet with success there may be millions in it. I give you the chance to-night; to-morrow I may have found some one else. Take it, and have your gold. Refuse it, and starve. Listen. Here is an earnest."

She shook a well-filled purse, and he could hear the musical jingle of coin. He listened, then said abruptly:

"Who are you?"

"What is that to you? I have many names, and perhaps you would be none the worse for hearing them all. Some call me Madam Pharissee."

The man gave a start.

"I have heard of you. You are a queer one; but I think you'll do to tie to. I'll give you my word and my hand, but I'll warn you if you ever go back on me, at the first sign I'll shoot you dead as I would a mad-dog."

In turn the woman hesitated.

Then, after a warning motion, she tossed the man the purse which he caught dexterously.

"You've bought me. Now shake and give yer orders. I ain't fool enough to think you're giving a poor devil a starter for nothing. You've saved my life, an' done it just when there was a new leaf to turn over. I'm with you. What do you want?"

She held out her hand and grasped his.

"I want you to be one man, and that man mine, all the time. If you are going to set up for Honest Frank, don't throw in the talk of any other man or talk like half a dozen persons. That might look suspicious. First, I'll give you a few signs that you must never forget. When you see them you will know that they call for backing. I have some queer friends, but they are all working for me, and for the same end."

Rapidly she gave the signs, and tested him in their knowledge. He repeated them without hesitation or mistake.

"What next?"

"Next? well, at midnight come into Mike's and play. Whether you win or lose makes little difference, so that you play the game out. If nothing happens go home to your lair, and wait till you hear from me. Have no concern about your wants; they will be provided for. That is all. Only be ready for a journey at any time."

"Very well. But, look here! I've heard you knew about everything; couldn't you tell me

who it was that played me this trick? When a man clubs me from behind I want to get even with him."

"I might; but I will not. You belong to me, now. Of course you can back down at any time; but until you do I can't have you getting up any outside affairs. After we are done with each other I will post you up as far as you want to go, and you can settle up your old scores, all in a bunch."

"Thankee. That's about ther right way to talk it. It won't do to sprout too vigorously in ther beginnin'; they'd think I was a weed, down in ther city, an' might raise right at me, to cut me down."

"Very well; I see you are a man of sense. Put your house in order, though, for it will not be long before we will be going."

"And if it's all the same, which way?"

"South."

Honest Frank gave a low whistle.

"That's into the desert, then. A hundred and fifty miles as ther buzzard flies won't take you out of the dry; I've been there."

"I know it. That's one reason I want you. You told a little about that southern trip, and I guessed more. That will do. Wash the blood off of your head and be on hand as I told you. Good-by for the present."

The woman waved her hand in a parting gesture and glided away, leaving the man to stand there with gradually rising astonishment as he thought of how the improbable had occurred.

Who was Madam Pharisee?

He knew no more of her now than he had an hour before. Her name he had heard mentioned more than once in the last six months, but heretofore he had never met her. Report had said that she was a beautiful woman, full of nerve, who sometimes appeared as a gambler, horse-racer and unsexed sport; at other times as an actress or cantatrice, and again as a strange mysterious woman, with an almost supernatural power to read the past, present and future of those who chose to consult her, and cross her palm with gold.

Honest Frank was not at all deficient in knowledge of the ways and wiles of this wicked world, and he had very shrewd suspicions as to who had such variegated reputations.

"Allee samee she'll find me round to kerry my corner ov ther contract," he muttered to himself with a reckless laugh.

"But wouldn't it be the joke ov ther season ef it war her that toted off my grub-sack? Let's take a leetle squint at ther sign."

A careful investigation, however, convinced him that his suspicions were probably groundless. He found where the three men had lain in ambush, and noted with disgust how perfectly he had put himself in their power. Then he found the trail left after their departure, and saw that it probably led into the city, by a circuitous route.

He did not attempt to follow it now, but found his way to his hut, where he washed his head, made some changes in his clothing, and belted on his weapons that were lying in a corner.

Then he turned his face again toward the city, intending to obtain his supper there, before keeping the appointment at Mike's saloon.

As he seated himself under the hospitable roof of a canvas-covered "hotel" he heard a bit of the conversation of two men, who were just about passing out.

"An' don't yer furgit ter be round at Mike's ter-night. Ther Tough from Tucson is in town, and he'll be thar."

"You bet I'm round. Thar's fun afloat, an' ef I see a chance I'll chip. But I tell yer, he's a shooter."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TOUGH FROM TUCSON IS AROUND.

"DOG GONE 'em, they say I'm no sport? Why, cuss 'em, I'm a loon on nine wheels; I'm double death on three white bosses; I'm a tearer, an' a screamer, an' a tough ole grizzly, jist from the mountains! Waugh! On'y taste me! Feel me claws an' see ef I ain't a ripper an' a gouger. Ah-h-h! I feel so good! Some galoot jist mount me, fur love er money, an' start ther circus."

The speaker closed with a yell that the resources of orthography are too limited to reproduce on paper; and then glared around him savagely.

His advent had not created much excitement, and he had nominated his poison in a quiet sort of way that gave no indication of what was to follow. Certainly no one at Mike's took any notice of the ordinary-looking little man who slipped up to the bar as quietly as if he was out of place and ashamed of it. It was only when he had imbibed twice or thrice that he woke up, and showed that there was a strong possibility of there being fun afloat.

But when a no-account little man came into Mike's and began to proclaim himself a chief, the natural consequence to be expected was that the ambitious hero would be hustled out by a combination of shoulders; if nothing worse happened to him.

Half a dozen men made a movement toward the stranger; and then the half-dozen stopped

it right then and there, for down went his hands into his side pockets like lightning. There were none there so fresh as not to know what that meant. From the business-like style and rapidity of his motions it was pretty certain that he meant to shoot.

It was then that he made use of the words given in the opening of the chapter; and it was just then that Honest Frank, in search of his little game, entered the saloon; and as the crowd in some way fell apart, shifting to either side, a lane was formed, at one end of which was the no-account looking sport; and at the other Frank of the lately empty buckskin.

Every one looked at the new-comer as though it was his say; and he spoke almost as soon as they looked:

"Prezactly, ole man. That's the way to talk it, but who the thunder be you, anyhow?"

That put Honest Frank in, and left the rest out. As a public benefactor one would have supposed it would have endeared him to the hearts of all present.

"I'm the Tough from Tucson, an' the game is set; you want to chip in? Sa-a-y?"

The little man gave a savage stare at the newcomer, who burst into a careless laugh.

"Oh, I'm not carin'. This ain't any of my circus. I ain't trod on any man's toes, so there ain't no need to rile. But sooner than starve I guess I'd go in. Don't rub me too hard ag'in' ther fur, pard; fur I'm sartin death when I settle down to biz."

"That's right! That's ther way ter talk it. Now yer shout. I've bin a-waitin' on these yere galoots, but ther ain't no fun in 'em. You're my mutton. You're the man with the sand, eh?"

With his hands still in his pockets, the little man glared around him; and there was a cutting scorn in his voice that was enough to make easier-tempered men than those who patronized the bar and tables say their prayers backward.

All the same no one moved, for public opinion had decided that it was best to let the little tough take off the edge of his appetite masticating Honest Frank, who, being in a manner an outsider, was of no particular account.

And back from the crowd to Frank went his glance.

"But, say," he continued, "maybe you ain't a chief. I never tackle no slouches. It ain't wuth while wastin' ther time. Ef yer ain't a shooter an' a gouger, an' way up with the knife, jist say so. I ain't lookin' fur lambs ter slaughter. One ov my friends kim down to this hyer city, an' they robbed him fust, an' took his ha'r afterwards. I'm hyer gittin' even. Ef you war one o' them chaps from Jericho, say ther word, an' ther orkestry strikes up."

"I reckon I must a' bin one ov ther thieves," responded Honest Frank, in a tone of subdued resignation. "Only one thing afore we begin. You ain't goin' to plug me outer yer pockets. I ain't so ravin' fur a rampage ez to keer about goin' fur a man that hed ther drop on me."

"Do you think I ain't white? No lead in mine unless I'm driv to it. It's ther cold steel that shows who's who. If you mean sport, out with yer toothpick an' begin."

As he spoke his hands left his pockets, and the right one sought the girdled weapons at his waist, just as Honest Frank seized his own knife; and the two drew at once, and stood facing each other, though half a dozen yards of space lay between them.

There seemed to be an ominous knitting on the brow of the little man from Tucson, and for an instant the careless look left the face of Honest Frank, and his hand went back and then forward with a quick jerk.

It was hard to tell which of the two were first, or whether their hands moved together. At the same instant the knife of the Tough from Tucson went gleaming through the air, there was a sharp chug of steel striking steel, and then the two khives dropped with a clang to the floor, about midway between the pair of gladiators.

From one to the other went the glances of the bystanders, in a bewildered sort of stare. No one was exactly certain, but all believed that one or the other had premeditated this mid-air parry; and whichever it was, he was a man of nerve and skill to risk his life on the hazard.

They were still the length of the long room apart, for Frank had halted just within the doorway; and it was a very comfortable distance to begin work with revolvers; but at this fiasco there was a sudden halt in the proceedings. The little man threw his hand up, and Honest Frank unclasped his fingers from the butt of his revolver, which he had mechanically grasped the moment he had flung the knife. He spoke as carelessly as ever.

"How's that fur an opening? I ain't no slouch with ther tools when I've got my hand in; but I'm a little slow just now. Score one fur Honest Frank."

"That's elegant. That's just fine. You're a lightnin' jerker, you be. Say, pard, s'pose we drop this thing, an' hitch bosses. You an' me kin jist hold ther town. Gi'n us yer paw, ole grizzly. Yer a better man with ther knife than I be, 'cause you've got a quicker eye an' hand."

"Can't say I'm yearnin' to set up fur a chief."

I take things as they come. If you want to drop things hyar, I'm willin'; if you want ther liveliest time outer jail, I'm still thar. Take me or leave me, it's all one. I'm not 'round on ther shoot unless some one crowds me; but I don't crowd wuth a cent."

"Gi'n us yer handle, then, an' waltz up an' saturate. I'm all alone in this yere camp, an' I ain't seen a man afore I'd keer to tie to."

Hostilities seemed to cease as soon as they began: much to the disgust of some, for there were a few there who would have been charmed to see matters pushed to a fatal ending. From the moment Ben Blake saw the skillful use that Harper made of his knife, he recognized that he and his pards had picked up the wrong man to play for a victim; and that if a time of reckoning came for the work of the past evening, it might go hard with him. Yet, the way things were going, Honest Frank was not likely to increase his popularity with the crowd, for it looked like a combination of two against the town. Without further palaver the two stood at the bar together, and imbibed.

After that there was not much chance that they would come together as hostiles soon; and the question was what notice saloon etiquette required the people of the camp to take in regard to the open defiance of the little red-headed stranger.

They knew him now pretty well, by reputation at least; for half a dozen of those present had heard reports of this same stranger, and they enlightened the rest. He had turned up in more than one camp, of late, and those who had seen or heard of him all agreed that he was lightning on the shoot.

Before the question was decided there was a new development. Through the open doorway there entered a stranger, who gave a curious glance around him, as though uncertain as to what sort of company he found himself in.

The stranger was carelessly dressed, and had an easy, quiet step. His eyes were a soft gray and his face was well covered with a bronze beard and mustache. Stranger or not, he dropped into the ways of the place, after that one moment of hesitation. He moved on up to the bar, and calling for whisky glanced at Honest Frank and his newly made friend:

"Gentlemen," he said, in a quiet way that seemed to be habitual with him, "will you join me?"

"Don't keer ef I do," assented the red-bearded little man, while Frank simply nodded. He was gazing at the stranger with what might easily have been taken for a surprised stare.

"And after that what do you say to a little game? I'm alone in the city; an' I came in hyer to pass away the evening. It's awful dull work, by yourself, in such a camp."

"Don't care if I do," assented the Tough from Tucson, as easily as though he was granting a favor, but Honest Frank, who had turned and was watching him, saw a sudden hot glance in his black eyes.

"Oh, I'm no card sharp," continued the stranger, as he drew out a buckskin, heavy with gold, and threw an eagle down on the bar. "If you want a heavy game don't size me. I'm down hyer looking at the prospects. My name is Jones, Charles Jones, of Cinnabar—and I can't play worth a cent; but they do say I have the awfulest luck at raking in the pots with a jack at the head, and such like hands; and when I get agoing I sometimes branch out beyond the limit. But I just like a quiet little game, with enough on it to make it interesting."

"That's my style, every time. I'm Luke Munson, from Tucson, and the boys all call me Lucky Luke. I came down yere to get even with a gang that went through my old side pard, Hank Morris, but ther ain't no sand in them galoots, nohow; an' so, Mister Jones, if yer mean sportin', in a small quiet way, I'm yer hair pin."

"Well, pard, ef yer goin' to wrastle with the pasteboards, I wouldn't be rubbin' it in too thick on 'em, er they may wring in on us some thin' wuss ner a cold deck. I've seen climates about this sultry afore, an' they generally panned out about three corpses to the square yard, afore morning."

Honest Frank gave his warning in a low tone, for he saw that Lucky Luke had stirred up a feeling that was more than likely to break out into hostility. He had eyes for everything, and seeing this made a note of it.

Jones of Cinnabar, had eyes for the situation also; and, overhearing the warning, added:

"Perhaps you are right. If you've got nothing better to offer come along with me. I'm at the Silver Hall, and it's a heap sight quieter there. Come along, and we'll get a table there, and another hand."

"I'm your man; but it don't make a pin's difference. Hyar, er elsewhere, Lucky Luke kin hold his own."

The conference, held in a low tone, was hardly understood by the bystanders, who were somewhat surprised to see the three pass out together.

Silver Hall was at the other end of the camp, and was the head-quarters of the aristocracy of the city. Although it boasted of owning the

appellation of hotel, games of chance flourished as vigorously there as elsewhere, and it seemed nothing out of the way for the gentleman by the name of Jones to suggest an adjournment thither.

Yet Honest Frank was not altogether at his ease. He glanced warily from side to side, at times; but for the most part kept his eyes fixed on Jones, of Cinnabar. Once he muttered to himself:

"It ain't no fraud; its him—Jones, of Cinnabar. He orter know me; is he playin' off, er hez he furgot? He's a rustler, but I reckon I know his gait. Ef he finds this weasel goin' to sleep he'd better chaw his head off."

Then suddenly he gave a great spring, caught Jones and flung him over his hip, and jerked out two revolvers, just as half a dozen men, with ready leveled pistols arose from the darkness and hemmed the little party in from every side.

CHAPTER XIV.

NOT ACCORDING TO THE CODE.

HONEST FRANK was as quick as a panther, and had been suspicious all along; yet he was just a little too late, for the moment that he lost disposing of Jones of Cinnabar gave the assailing party time to put in their work. When he looked around him the Tough from Tucson had disappeared, and he could hear the sounds of rapidly retreating footsteps. He thought that without a doubt Lucky Luke was in the hands of the men who had risen like specters from the ground.

What it meant he did not know; but he rather suspected that some of the desperadoes of the city had adopted this means to get even, and that the proposal of Jones to retire to Silver Hall was part of the plot. For himself he did not believe there was any danger unless he opened the ball; and for reasons of his own he did not wish to begin a life and death conflict then and there. He stepped back a pace or two until one of his revolvers was leveled at the prostrate man, while the other menaced the crowd in a general sort of way.

"I wouldn't pull if I was you," he sung out. "I ain't a-carin' in the least; but I reckon ef you go to crowdin' ther mourners thar'll be more ov a load than ther hearse kin carry. I've got him, sure; an' ef yer don't put up them pop guns ther starlight 'll be shinin' through him right after I crook my finger."

A coarse laugh followed this threat.

"That's right, pard; go for him. 'Muse yerself maulin' him 'round; he ain't our duckling. His gang is furder on. Good-mornin'."

The speaker and his friends leaped backward, and disappeared as suddenly as they had come, leaving Honest Frank alone with his prisoner, who had just recovered his senses, and raised to a sitting posture.

"You're a sweet-scented duckling, you be," was Honest Frank's salutation. "I wouldn't 'a' thought it ov yer; but, pard, yer got to settle with me. Thar ain't no use runnin' arter him now; but I'll take it outer your hide an' call it square. He wa'n't no pertickler friend o' mine anyhow. Git up an' spread yerself. I allers did want ter see which was ther best man."

"You're crazy," responded Jones, as he slowly rose. "What have I to do with the matter? If you had kept your hands to yourself we might have stood them off; but you had to tackle me, and that let them out. What's happened, anyhow?"

"What's happened? Why, yer pards hez toted off Lucky Luke ov Tucson, an' by this time I reckon they've got him hangin' to a scrub oak. I ain't fool enough to bu'st myself follerin' on foot when they're goin' a-hossback; an' so, ez I remarked afore, I'm goin' to take it outen you. That's what's the matter. Git up an' draw; er step off ten paces an' begin."

"Begin what? I've no quarrel with you."

"Yes but you have. I knowed you soon ez I clapped peepers on yer; an' it ain't the squar' thing ter go back on an ole pard. Ef you er yer friends been in ther drag I'd 'a' done my level best at ther end o' ther rope; but you'd ez soon ez not I'd gone in outen ther wet so you could kerry through yer own game. I knowed yer wa'n't on ther square, though, an' war a-watchin' ov yer, an' now I'm waitin' ter settle. Arter this, one er the t'other on us 'll never go back on an old friend, you bet."

"Have it your own way, then, if you will be a fool. I'll admit that I was after the little red-headed man, and I meant him no harm."

"Whar is he now, then? That filly won't trot, my old friend. I know you've got the sand fur any kind of a job, so I ain't afeared ov you tryin' to dodge yer record. Unless you mean to crawfish, git ready. You don't want me to take you over my knee, do yer?"

"Hardly, my impatient friend; though I can't see what good it is going to do either of us to carry the thing further. I wanted to get the tough where I could ask him a couple questions. Don't see that that was anything I should slay you for."

"Maybe you could ask them questions of me —afre ther funeral? What I don't know ain't hardly wuth talkin' about."

"There's something in that. Here goes. Where is Madam Pharissee. This Sport from Tucson is in some way connected with her; and I want to find her."

"You do. My idea is that you're wantin' entirely too much. There's some things I won't answer, an' that's one of 'em. We'll kin back to business. It ain't no use fur us to stand up close an' pop away; fur at ten yard we'd both drop ther fust fire. Yer see I know yer. Ther' bein' no one else to give ther word what I purpose is this. We stand back ter back an' one ov us says, 'March!' Then we step out twenty steps each an' ther same galoot says, 'One, two three fire!' At 'one' we kin turn our thoughts on kingdom come; at 'two' we kin say our prayers; at three we kin take a last look at this yere beautiful earth, an' at 'fire' both wheel an' let drive, waltzin' closer ef ther first shot don't settle ther diffiklity."

"Exactly. And who is to give the word?"

"That 'pends on yer luck. Hyar's a coin. Odder even on ther date? Ther man that wins is boss ov ther job."

"Odd it is!"

The two bent over the unclosed hand of Honest Frank.

It seemed to be light enough when looking at each other. Either would have risked his life on a snap shot at a dozen yards; but as they bent over the extended hand they could only see a round, dark spot upon the palm.

From a pocket Honest Frank drew a match and struck it upon the leg of his rough corduroy pantaloons, and by the sputtering light the two bent over and examined the date of the coin.

"Even it is! Eighteen hundred and forty-eight! I'm boss of this friendly meeting, an' I guess I remember enough ov ther code ter put it through humpty-dumpty, right side up with keer. Is yer iron ready?"

"Ready it is," answered the other.

"Then back ter back an' move off twenty paces. Take keer yer don't turn afore ther word 'three,' er I'll plug yer quicker nor a wink. Now!"

Off stepped the two, twenty steps each.

It was quite a distance for pistol practice; but it introduced, as far as possible, the element of chance into the first shot. After that it would be a question of scientific work. The best, boldest man would probably win.

With military precision they halted at the same instant.

"One! Two! Three!"

At that moment, when the two men turned like automata, a dark figure sprung in front of Honest Frank and caught his rising arm in a light but firm grasp.

"Hold!" exclaimed the new-comer, in a soft, feminine voice.

"What would you do? I have a claim on this man. He is my only friend. Shoot me first, for without him I am lost."

"Excuse me, miss, but yer in a fair way fur gittin' me plugged. Ef you'll jist stand aside till this leetle game is played out, I'll be happy to listen to what you've got to remark, but I'm all business now. Don't you see ther other chap is ready to shoot?"

"No. I have been listening until I could bear it no longer. It is you who would shoot. You have forced him, in defense of his life, to accept your challenge. For a moment I thought of killing you where you stood. As you two bent together, looking at that coin by the light of the match, I raised my weapon once; but I could not assassinate. At least give over this madness for the present, and do not attempt to deprive me of the one sole friend I have in this camp, when so much, for me, depends upon his aid."

She half turned, and threw up her arm in a gesture intended for the other man.

"I'm much oblieged, miss, fur yer kindness, an' all that; but ther way ov it all is this: He roped me an my pard out, talking about a leetle game at ther Silver Hall; an' all ther time it war a put-up job. He led us down hyar into ambush; an' while I wasted my time foolin' round with him, his pard kerried mine off, an' left us two hyar to settle it between us. Ther sharp thet plays me fur a lamb ginerally finds I've got wolves' teeth. Thet's all."

"You are mistaken. With no such gang had he any connection. He and I are here alone. Put up your weapon and go your way, leaving us to go ours. Grant it to me as a favor, can you not?"

The man from Cinnabar had not moved an inch since the interruption. On the contrary he had folded his arms, with his revolver still in his grasp, and waited patiently for this strange interruption to cease. If this girl was a friend of his he was strangely unconcerned.

"It can't be did, miss. After the distance is all paced out, an' everything, it would be livin' death to go off the field 'thout a shot. I'll promise this, though: Ef I plant him—ez I surely will ef you don't bother—I'll do what I kin fur you, ez fur ez it don't interfere with my affairs. Look out, pard, it's comin'!"

He stepped quickly to one side; but the girl was as quick as he. Again she sprung between the two; and this time she held in her hand a

small revolver, with the muzzle of which she covered the breast of Honest Frank.

"Don't you move!" she exclaimed, sharply. "If there is no other way I will use this, as I well know how."

"See hyar, I can't shoot a woman, nohow. Pard, I pass this hand; but just recomember that there's one atween us. You're behind a set o' petticoats now, but ther'll come a day to settle, an' Honest Frank 'll get square, er flop under."

The man spoke bitterly, and turned upon his heel as he spoke.

He neither looked back then, nor to the right nor left, but followed straight along on the trail made by those who had abducted his newly-made pard, the Tough from Tucson."

Jones of Cinnabar said nothing. He remained in the same attitude, and for all the attention he paid to the departing man one would have said that the threat had passed over his head unheard.

Moreover, when the sounds of the departing footsteps had died away he seemed as unconcerned about the presence of the woman who had interfered, if not in his behalf at least to the possible salvation of his life. Though she had claimed him as her only friend he was in no great hurry to acknowledge her as such. Indeed, from the motion of his head, one would suppose that the glance he gave, as she moved silently toward him, was one of suspicion.

A yard or two away from him she halted, and folding her arms in the same way that his own were folded she stared him fully in the face.

"Well?"

She spoke shortly, and as though seeking an answer to some well known question that had been mooted between them.

"Well, miss; what is it?"

"What? Have you no word of greeting; or have you forgotten me? When I saw you I thought I had found a friend at last, upon whom I could rely. I am here and alone; Will you not serve me? I am in no little danger."

"I can't say that I rejoice.—You've got me in a nice pickle. If Honest Frank don't let daylight through me on sight he's not the man I take him for. Here I had a chance."

"And this is the greeting he gives me. This is the kind of man my fancied knight is. Thank you for undeceiving me so soon. You are no coward I know; you are mercenary. If I brought gold in my hands I would be welcome. Because I say I am alone and without a friend I can only see a cold shoulder."

"You're mistaken, miss. I'm not a talker; and I've just placed you. You are Kate Knox."

"So you own me at last. Well, your hand. Are you for me or not?"

The man hesitated a moment and then suddenly thrust out his hand.

"There it is; as you do by me so will I do by you. Now what is it? Do you need my purse or my wrist?"

It was her turn to hesitate now. Evidently he had not met her as she had expected.

"Can you not guess? The first thing that I would have is intelligence. What of my father? From the time he parted from you I have known nothing of him."

"That's strange, miss. He didn't talk as though he meant to skip out. I struck him for a few hundreds; but he was very solid still, and I reckon he wasn't ther sort of a man that would have to run from the sheriff. He had a level head, too. He knew I was too strong for him at draw, and though he didn't like to own up before the boys, he agreed to jump the game after we got by ourselves. So we parted, and that's the last I know about him."

He spoke straight along, in his quiet way that seemed to be truth itself, but the girl was not altogether satisfied.

"Then I cannot understand the thing at all, and more than ever I must look to you for help. Good heavens if anything could have happened—I trusted to find him with you."

"I'll do the best I can for you—for the sake of old times and your father. What's your platform?"

"Your hand again. To-morrow—yes, this very night if it can be—we must be on our way. I have a long journey to make; and you must be my companion, and, as far as you can, my guide. You need not think I ask as a beggar. Money cannot pay the service you will do me; but as far as it can go you will have no reason to complain. I know not how far my father has trusted you—I have reason to believe he has told you much—but in time I will tell you my strange story, if it should, indeed, be new. To-night we must evade the eyes that are watching, keen as a wolf's."

"Exactly. And who is it you fear?"

"One who is on my track and whom I fear with a strange, unreasoning fear. Madam Pharissee, she first of all; after her others who are hunting me down to wring from me a secret. They may be shadows, they may be phantoms; if they are not they will have my secret first, my life afterward. They have already tried for both."

"There is money in your secret, is there?"
"Millions; else the Red League would scarcely have spared me, or followed on my trail."

"Madam Pharisee! The Red League! They are worth the fighting. If I was a man of sense I'd try not to run foul of them for several times millions. As it is—I am with you. Come on!"

Together the two left the spot, turning their steps toward the Silver Hall.

CHAPTER XV.

A MAN WITH THE SAND.

THE Tough from Tucson was quick with his revolvers, very quick; but to draw and pull trigger requires a fraction of time, and that was not allowed him.

On the contrary the first intimation of danger was feeling a pair of arms tightening around him, just below the shoulders, with a herculean clasp. Almost at the same instant a second pair of hands deftly fastened a bandage in and over his mouth. Then he was picked bodily from the ground and borne away. Fairly hidden from those left behind, his hands were tied with a cord and he was handed up to a horseman. After that there was a little cavalcade riding rapidly away to the south.

Perhaps Lucky Luke had faith in his future; or it may be that he had a vein of sterling good sense. At any rate from the first he remained perfectly passive in the hands of his captors. He could not cry out, and there was no use to struggle. The only sensible course was to remain quiet and wait for the *denouement*.

After a time there was the sound of plashing water, quite audible; and then the cavalcade halted, and then the Tough from Tucson found himself once more on *terra firma*, though his hands were still bound behind his back.

Then there was a silence that lasted for some minutes—perhaps the time might have been better measured by fractions of an hour. It might be that it was intended to be impressive; or, again, perhaps, there was a stay of proceedings until those that had been left behind could come up. At any rate, there was a rustle of approaching footsteps; and the snap of a match, followed by the glow of a lighted lantern.

For the first time Lucky Luke was able to fairly see the manner of people into whose hands he had fallen.

The sight was not particularly reassuring. Around him were grouped six men, who were all armed; and, what was more, they were dressed in a sort of semi-uniform that served as a thorough disguise. Every man had on a red tunic, and over his face a red mask. While Lucky Luke gazed at the six, a seventh man stepped into sight, and, facing the prisoner, addressed him in a solemn tone:

"At a council meeting of the Red League, it was decided that there was no room for Luke Munson, otherwise known as the Tough from Tucson. Either the Red League or he must evaporate. Which it will be we leave it to yourself to judge."

Lucky Luke stared around him, apparently in some surprise. The gag was removed from his mouth and at last he could speak.

"I'm not posted on yer Red Leagues, er yer grand councils; an' I don't reckon to take much account ov a parcel ov lunatics in crimson. Ef you mean to shoot me down without any show fur my white alley, I guess I'm dead gone done fur; but ef you let me have my hands loose, an' my back ag'in' this tree, I'll make it ther hottest fur that same Red League that they've known since they slid outen Sodom an' Gomorrah by ther back door."

"No doubt, no doubt!" answered the leader, with a sneer. "But a fool that won't take warning, must accept the reward of his folly. We gave you fair notice to give up your game, that was treading on our toes; and you just went ahead. Wolf shouldn't eat wolf; but when the pack is hu' gry, it's bad for an outsider."

"Fix it up to suit yourselves—I ain't the man to beg, if ace, jack an' tray are ag'in' me. I'll stand my han', so lead yer trumps."

More reckless bravado the League had never met with; for there was not a doubt but that the Tough from Tucson fully understood the situation. He could hardly help it since seven men were facing him, ranged in a semicircle, and every man had a hand resting upon the butt of a revolver.

"We are afraid there is nothing else to do; yet we will give you the opportunity, never before offered twice to any man, to become a member of the League. We are aware of your aims, and we know that you cannot succeed; while we must and will. You and Madam Pharisee are casting away your time and lives for nothing. In any event you could not succeed; and to make failure certain the Red League stands squarely across your track."

"Thankee fur ther warnin' The hog said suthin' like that to ther injine, once; an' ther' war'n't a grease-spot left of him when ther injine went by. But who ther thunder is Madam Pharisee?"

"Sc you won't join us? You prefer to stick to the woman—who will desert you or slay you the moment she needs you no longer for a tool? Think again."

"Ez fur ez ther woman is concerned yer barkin' up ther wrong tree. You'll find no coon thar. I'm paddlin' my own canoe. Ef you think ther leetle red-headed Tough from Tucson is fool enough to trust any woman in a game fur gold you're too fresh fur me—salt won't save you."

"Be done with your foolishness; lying cannot save you. We know the truth as it is. Your answer now; and remember, whatever it is is your final one."

The speaker was to all appearance in dead earnest. His voice, disguised though it evidently was, grew sterner. Through the two holes in his red mask his eyes glowed like two coals of fire. The climax could not be far off.

Lucky Luke was leaning against the tree at his back; and his hands had been secured behind him with three or four turns and as many knots of a strong cord. He seemed to be altogether helpless, and so the Red Leaguers thought; but certainly they never were more mistaken. It was true that they had bound his arms, and removed knife and revolver from his belt; but there are some that will never stay bound, and the Tough from Tucson was one of that sort.

When the cords had first encircled his wrists he had been shrewd enough to turn them so that they presented almost the entire surface of both.

Now he gave a quick turn that brought them close together, and then slid them away. Down behind him dropped the knotted cord, while his freed hands, still hidden from sight, darted into a pair of secret pockets in the lining of the back of his coat.

Then out flashed two revolvers; one covering the chief of the League, the other menacing the six around and beyond him. The Tough from Tucson had been biding his time, and now was ready for business.

"Don't you stir!"

Quick and sharp fell the words; though they might have been thrown away on worse men, since, so great was their surprise they could not for the instant believe the evidence of their own senses.

"Oh, I've got you foul," continued the little Tough from Tucson, with a bantering tone, and unwavering hands. "When you go cavoring 'round Luke Munson you want to do it with hammers up an' fingers on the trigger. It's about time this Red League dissolved; if any body has reasons to offer why I shouldn't get right down to the work of doing it they're in order: otherwise, an' in about ten seconds, I'm going to let loose. You've heard I kin shoot, I reckon. Kin we come to terms, or shall I begin?"

"What terms are to be made?" said the chief of the Red League unconcernedly, though he most of all was in immediate danger. Without doubt the first shot of Lucky Luke would be aimed at him—and at that distance, even in the uncertain light he would hardly miss.

"That sounds like reason, that does. I s'pose my best hold would be to wipe out the crowd; but I ain't blood-thirsty enough. It's a kinder weakness. Perhaps the next best is to swear yer all in, an' let yer go. Up with both hands, all on you, and repeat what I say. I kin make it so iron-clad that even the Red League won't break it; see ef I don't."

There were seven of the Leaguers and every one of them had revolver and knife; yet Lucky Luke held the drop, and that made all the difference. When he pulled trigger it was almost certain that two of them would drop; and then in the hasty firing that would follow Jack was sure to be as good as his master, and perhaps a shade better.

So up went the hands; those of the leader first, and the other dozen just a shade later, while the little man with the cocked revolvers for a moment gazed at the spectacle with silent satisfaction. There were seven men there, who, a moment before, had held him their prisoner, and who were burning to slay him; yet all alone he had turned the tables and could swing them hither and thither to suit his will.

This, at least, was what he made of it. He had no suspicion that there was anything hidden by their ready haste until a sudden grip tightened like a pair of vises on his wrists, and both arms were thrown up from the level on which he had held them.

Around the tree at his back had slipped an eighth Leaguer, as yet unseen, and taken him unawares.

Sudden and irresistible as the attack was it did not unnerve him, since, with a quick spring he flung himself sideways, bringing the body of his assailant between him and the League.

It was time, for, as they caught sight of the shadow creeping around at his elbow, every hand dropped downward like lightning, and seven revolvers flashed out from their holsters. He had had his chance, and lost it. Little danger was there that he could find the League unprepared again.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the chief. "Really, the Tough from Tucson is not so terrible a little fellow after all. If he was equal to his reputation he would have had this place just swimming in gore, besides making a noise that would have been as dangerous as his revolvers. We held

the ace—and it won. We are a quiet set, yeu observe, and work in night and silence. No pistols for us if we can help it. To make things certain, we will immediately proceed to apply a little rope. Up with him."

This time it seemed certain that Lucky Luke had reached the end of his streak. He was like a child in the strong grip that forced him slowly upon his knees; and already a rope was dangling from a limb of the tree that stretched out just over his head. Yet tightly clutched in his two hands were the two revolvers, though, try as he might, they would point no way but directly upward.

"Hold him there a moment, Caleb," continued the chief. "Let him take one more look around, as it's his last night on earth."

"I guess not!"

The answer came swift as an echo, but louder and clearer, and mingled with the words was the sound of a thud, and the huge man that was holding fast to Munson received a blow that had been sent straight from the shoulder out, that fairly lifted him from the ground.

"I'm hyar, Honest Frank, and no discount. Take me if you want a man. When there's fun afloat you generally hear me shouting."

And so quickly that his movements could hardly be seen Honest Frank bounded forward, struck two more blows, left and right, and then drew his revolvers, while the Tough from Tucson, springing to his feet as his captor dropped, brought his own weapons once more to a level. Now the Red League had two men to face; and the new-comer was no slouch either.

But the masked men were prudent if not panic-stricken. Without waiting for further development they turned like one man, and fled.

And Honest Frank and Lucky Luke as rapidly withdrew in another direction. Unless they could exterminate the Red League it was not worth while to begin—just now they acted as though they had important business elsewhere.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SHERIFF FROM DOG HOLE.

GOING toward Silver Hall Kate Knox and the quiet sport began to talk more freely.

"You are alone," said the man, questioningly. "Tell me what you can about your father. Perhaps I can give a guess that will do you good. Where do you think he is?"

"Dead?" answered the girl, solemnly. "I begin to believe it now. Shot dead by an unknown hand, but a little after he parted from you. They even suspected that you knew something of it, but I knew you better and took your part."

Jones started, but remained silent.

"Perhaps it was Madam Pharisee, perhaps it was the Red League. It makes no difference now; but by and by I must know to avenge. You served us once well. I am not afraid to trust you again. If we could only have met you sooner I might not be desolate now."

"Perhaps. But I reckon there was a strong hand against him. You are actually here alone?"

"Alone; I was to come here."

"No money?"

"A little. As much as I need for present wants; and it would have been easy to get more."

"Why then are you alone?"

"Because I had no one to trust until I saw you. Had I not found you I should have made my journey alone. At least I should have made the attempt."

"And this journey—where does it lead to?"

"To the South. More than that I cannot tell, because I do not for a certainty know, though I have faith that I can find my way. It is over a year since I made the journey."

Jones looked keenly at his companion.

He had already recognized her, it is true; but for that reason itself he was the more inquisitive. As he remembered her she was a delicate looking mite of a thing, fair haired, with wonderful courage in emergency, yet he had never believed that of herself she would, at any price, risk the dangers of the weary trail.

Yet there could be no mistake.

This was Kate Knox by his side, and he was committed to her service. What he said he generally meant; and he had no thought of backing down, though he had a fair idea of the trouble that was in store for him.

"How did you get here?" he continued, after a momentary pause. "And how do you expect to continue your journey? Hardly on foot?"

"No, I left Dog Hole in the stage, but came here on horseback, and expect to leave in the same way. You are mounted, I know, and

our best plan is to ride away before morning. I have paid my bill in advance, for several days, so that no one can grumble if I take French leave."

"And I have done the same; though I certainly did not expect to strike any such adventure. Yes, that will be our line to follow, though I'm not so sure how it will work. I doubt if we can get away without those sharp eyes that are looking after you seeing the move. There's three men on the trail now. I have been watching them for some time and I am sure they mean no good."

"Hasten, then! We can reach the vicinity of Silver Hall, and then they certainly dare not attack us."

"Oh, they are welcome to all they can make off of this firm, as long as our eyes are open. They are worthless cowards, anyhow. I can tell that by the way they shirk along."

"Yet a mob of cowards can be dangerous enough at times, as I have seen more than once."

Nevertheless, though he spoke carelessly enough, and no doubt had as great a contempt for the three lurkers, whose forms could just be dimly made out, he quickened his pace somewhat. It was not direct attack that he feared, as much as an espionage that would prevent the contemplated disappearance. These men would do more harm at a distance than if they came to close quarters; for in the latter case there was little doubt in his mind that he could place them where they would care little whether he went or came.

The three still kept their distance, however, ranging along as though they yearned to spring yet dared not. They were, in fact, the three who had attacked Honest Frank just at sunset. They had marked the purse displayed at Mike's, and had laid out an ambuscade—a trap to be sprung in case things should appear favorable.

Certainly they were treated to a succession of surprises.

It did not take them long to find out that they were not the only watchers, and they saw the abduction of the Tough from Tucson, the quarrel between Honest Frank and Mr. Jones of Cinnabar; and the sudden appearance of an unknown girl, with wondering interest. They even heard the greater part of the conversations; and it seemed quite likely that they had lit upon a series of mysteries that had a financial value behind them.

Ben Blake was no fool, if he was a cutthroat. He pieced what he heard together, and guessed at whatever was wanting. He motioned for silence; and followed on until he was certain that the two were going to Silver Hall, and that the presence of himself and his two pards had been noticed.

Then he gave a wave of his hand and the three dropped suddenly to the ground. When Jones looked again the gliding phantoms had disappeared.

This might mean that they had become disgusted and given up the game; or it might be a prelude to an attack. Jones dropped his hands on his revolvers warily; but he could see no opening for their use, though he had not a doubt but that the three were lurking within pistol range. Understanding that they knew he was on his guard he wasted no more time, but went straight on.

In a little time they reached Silver Hall, where every thing was moving along at flood tide. The business of the evening had just fairly begun. The lights were blazing, the violins were sounding and cards and dance were fairly under way.

The proprietor of Silver Hall, one George Albert, managed matters better than the majority of men could have done, keeping his saloon and hotel business apart, and yet making the one pay the other. It cost a little more to begin than most men would have cared to risk; but he drew almost double interest on the capital invested, and his boarders on the one side were not compelled to take any account of the affairs of his customers on the other, since the two sets of patrons entered the building from opposite ends. In the end devoted to the lodgers there was a hall; and though there was a doorway leading from this hall into the saloon, it was seldom used by any but the regular inhabitants of the house.

As the two came safely up they separated; Kate turning toward the private entrance, while the other made his way into the saloon, where his ingress attracted little if any attention. Everybody seemed to be minding his

own business; though there were three or four men scattered around lazily leaning against the wall, who were of the very sort that usually investigated a stranger.

Through the room strolled the man from Cinnabar, casting careless glances around him, and finally halting by the side of a table not far from the bar and from the rear door, that led into the hall beyond.

Several men, at this table, were deep in the intricacies of the standard American game of draw poker. They were playing with the silent grace of proficients, and on the table before them was quite a pile of gold. Around, evincing more apparent interest than the players themselves, were half a dozen spectators, who occasionally spoke in a low tone, whose intension showed that there was an under-current of partisan feeling running quite strongly.

All this Jones took in as he halted.

No one seemed to pay any attention to him, as the game was at a critical point, so he slid quietly into the circle of onlookers, though he had no intention of stopping longer than a minute or two.

The game grew more interesting with the next deal; one man stood his hand, another drew one card and the third asked for two only. He dodged his head from side to side—he would have been more than mortal not to have had a curiosity to know what was in the different hands.

One hand that he caught a glimpse of was a flush royal, another man held four aces.

What the other held he could not see; but undoubtedly it was either very good or very bad from the bold front he put on. First one and then the other raised the betting, and from the looks of the men it seemed likely that hundreds, if not thousands, would be put up before a call would be made or any one be driven to demand a sight for his money.

There was one thing that troubled Jones.

He had not seen the opening of the game; and was a stranger to the house. Did they play straight flushes there? If they did the betting would be apt to run away up; for even with the chances of a royal against them four aces will carry a man as near to the brink of ruin as any hand ever invented.

Of course at that stage of the game one could ask no questions of the bystanders, and could only look on with a nervous eagerness that grew greater and greater. There was nothing else that could by any possibility so completely have enthralled his attention. He had eyes and ears for nothing else.

Was it all a prearranged scheme?

The interested watcher never knew, though he might have his moments of suspicion.

As he stood there with his eyes glued upon the players, there came, without a shadow of a warning, a sudden interruption, apparently as startling to the most of the bystanders as it was to him.

Three men suddenly seized him, one grasping the collar of his coat, while the others caught each a wrist.

They were all strong men, and accustomed to their work; but for a moment it was a question whether their contract was not heavier than they could carry. There was no unseemly struggle, and not a loud word uttered; but the magnificent muscles of the prisoner contracted and his face flushed as he made one powerful effort, and only one.

Then he stood as still as a statue awaiting the result of this sudden and unprovoked attack.

"Gentlemen," said one of the players, rising from the table.

"I'm the representative of the law in Dog Hole Bar, and this is my prisoner. We have the case down on him very fine—it's murder and robbery, and if any of you journey past Dog Hole say this day two weeks, you'll see the kind of fruit the legal orchards around there can turn out."

Dance and gambling stopped and the crowd surged around.

"Murder, eh! who is it?" asked two or three of the nearest of the spectators; "he looks quiet enough now."

"Oh, he's a quiet one, he is, all the time. That's what they call him—'the Silent Sport.' And soft—bless your soul, you'd think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Soft Hand, the Sharp from Cinnabar, they called him; but nobody knew he was a man with a record. All the same, he won a man's money and diamonds and then shot him down in cold blood."

"And who was the man?"

"Herman Knox, a prospector, who has struck it rich more than once. It was a bloody murder, and there's a thousand reward on the head of the chap that we're going to hustle back in short order."

"Herman Knox? Who is he?"

A bystander asked the question; but the sheriff from Dog Hole never answered it, for at that instant the door to the rear hall swung open, and Kate Knox stood on its threshold.

She was white to the eyes and trembling with emotion.

"Herman Knox was my father; but that this man killed him is a vile lie. This man is innocent. Harm him if you dare!"

CHAPTER XVII.

SOMETHING THAT NO ONE BELIEVED.

THE apparition startled both captors and captive. Jones had hardly expected to see her there and then, while to the rest her appearance was a surprise and a mystery.

At the sound of her ringing voice the sheriff from Dog Hole looked up in genuine dismay.

"Good heavens, miss, you here! Of all places to look, this was the last I'd have expected to find you in! I've been on this trail ever since that night—except when I was looking for you—and I know what I'm saying. We don't need your evidence a bit, and there's no use to stir up your feelings. Go away now, and don't make a scene, and if you want to know the latest developments I'll come and post you upon them just as soon as I can place my prisoner where he will be safe for the night."

"I know all the developments since I left your place well enough. You are an honest man, no doubt; but you have made a mistake; indeed you have."

"Well, well, if this is a mistake it will all come right in time. We can fix it up. It will only make trouble if you stand here taking up our time."

"There is no time like the present. I know enough about south-western justice to be aware that if such mistakes are not straightened out at once it will be too late. He was my father's friend and is mine. I know that the charge is false—I swear it!"

"I am sorry, miss, that you have been deceived in this man; but if he didn't do it, can you tell us who did? There's very strong evidence against him, as you know; you see yourself that we couldn't let him go only on your say so. And if you had the strongest kind of proof, he'd have to go back to Dog Hole. We couldn't open the court here. There's not a man in the room that wouldn't do his best for you, miss. If you need a friend say the word, and you'll see how they'll all scramble to chip in; but the course of justice can't be stopped for private ends. He don't reckon on any such nonsense; and he's a sharp one, too. He hasn't said a word since he found the game was against him."

Kate Knox was puzzled.

She had been listening at the door, uncertain whether to open it to call out her friend, or to wait until she could see some messenger who might send him out. When she had heard the terrible charge she had acted upon the spur of the moment; but now she was at her wits' end to know what to do next, or whether there was anything she could do.

She looked at the prisoner.

He seemed scarcely as much concerned about the charge as a guilty man would have been. No doubt he felt certain of being able to convince Dog Hole of his innocence.

That, however, would take time, and just now she had no time to spare. If he went back she was lost.

Yet this was no case for fight. Against that roomful the two could do little. There was nothing for her but to wait.

"It is all a false charge!" she exclaimed passionately. "His foes, or mine, are at the bottom of this; but let them beware. The men who throw a charge of this kind upon the innocent are the ones who may be guilty themselves. If we go back let them look to themselves. Vengeance will come all the sooner."

"It hardly looks the square thing for you to be taken up for him," responded Tom Hayes, with some show of feeling. "We're a law-abiding set at Dog Hole, and when any one breaks the law then the people rise right at him. You ought to be the last one to grumble at that. If you don't know the facts in the case go away now and I'll come by and

by and post you up. This is hardly the place for you, and I've no more time to spend with you until I get my prisoner safe. I've talked it over once with you, already."

He was undoubtedly telling the truth, and so the girl seemed to see. Wonderful as was her nerve, for one so fair and fragile, she could help the man in no possible way. While she hesitated she happened to catch a gleam of the prisoner's eye and a slight motion of his head, and they both seemed to say go.

Without another word she wheeled and went, closing the door bein' l her, leaving the sheriff from Dog Hole to arrange for the safety of his prisoner.

As Kate Knox disappeared Tom Hayes turned to his prisoner, from whose belt his assistants had already removed the weapons swingin' there.

"You've got as much sense as most men, and I guess you won't try to buck against this game with a sure thing in its favor. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"I'm no talker and I don't see that there's anything I can say until I see who it is that's stocked the cards. Miss Knox hit it pretty close a bit ago. The men that put up this job are the men to mount and they'll find things lively shortly after I arrive at Dog Hole."

"So you admit knowing the parties; and having come from Dog Hole?"

One of the bystanders threw the question eagerly.

"I admit nothing. In this sort of thing I've nothing to say. When you get to the bottom facts I'll be all right. Till then I can keep my mouth shut. I'm not much of a talker anyhow."

He spoke carelessly and yet there was no doubt but that he meant what he said. Hayes nodded assent.

"All right, then. I'm not the man to ask you to knot the rope for your own neck. It will be done by other hands sure enough. It's a bad case, though you're making the best of it. We'll try to make you comfortable for the night, and to-morrow we'll strike out for the Hole."

Although the answer to the inquiries that Tom Hayes had already made were assuring enough he was by no means disposed to forget his caution. The landlord of Silver Hall might conscientiously believe this Soft Hand to be a stranger to the town; but in three thousand men hastily gathered there he might have any number, almost, of desperate friends, who would be on hand to work in his interest as soon as the word was passed around. For that reason he intended to keep his prisoner safely confined, and guarded until daylight. Then he and his men could take care of the rest.

The accommodations were, to be sure, rather limited. As yet no one had thought of such a contingency as having a murderer to hold. In a newly-made camp, capture, trial and execution of sentence generally follow in regular and rapid sequence—the sentence is usually an hour to leave town, or the rope.

In this case, however, there was no chance for trial. The prisoner had to be kept safely; and so a place of confinement had to be provided.

The city did not even boast a lock-up; and the nominal sort of marshal, who might have assisted in the emergency, had gone north, in search of a mule-thief.

Silver Hall was there of course, if they paid for their accommodations; and a little coop of a room just off the saloon seemed as good a place as any to watch the prisoner through the night; and in there he was hustled, after Boney Pink, the well-known faro dealer and legitimate occupant, had given his consent. At the single window one man took his station, while another remained at the door.

"Make yourself as comfortable as you can, here," said Hayes, motioning to the narrow bed. "To-morrow you will have a hard ride, and you may as well get ready. But don't you forget yourself and try walking in your sleep. We're all fair shots, and we never miss a chance to plug that sort of a man. It would save us lots of trouble, and Dog Hole would be as well satisfied."

"Thankee! I'm not as big a fool as I look. I ain't tryin' to get away just now. Ef I were I'd look out fur the galoots with the shootin'-irons first of all. I'll bunk in sure enough."

He threw himself carelessly on the bed and closed his eyes, either to seek slumber, or to avoid questioning, while Hayes, somewhat puzzled by the cool self-possession of his prisoner,

reiterated his orders to the guard, and then took his departure.

Certainly with two guards in the room there seemed little danger of an escape; but to make assurance doubly sure Hayes posted another guard in front of the house, just below the window, and saw that the door leading from the saloon into the hall was left wide open, so that no one could go near the wall of the little room, without being seen.

It is true that to do this he had to recruit his ranks from among the citizens; but it was not hard to do so, and his arrangements were soon made for alternate watches, in which there would always be a pair of men from Dog Hole to keep their eyes directly on the prisoner.

All this was well enough; but the frequenters of Silver Hall grew more and more curious, and determined to know what it was all about.

Tom Hayes went off finally in search of Miss Knox, and when he returned, without having had a glimpse of her, he found that the rumor of the arrest of a murderer had spread through the camp, and drawn a more than ordinarily large crowd together, while additions were constantly coming in.

There was no one who could give a connected history of the case; but as there was no lack of *raconteurs* there were some awful stories told; some of them holding up the prisoner in a dreadful light, and others bearing just as hard against his captors.

Two men came into the Silver Hall, whom Hayes happened at once to notice, as much, perhaps, on account of the very marked contrast between them, as for any other reason. The one was tall, dark, stoutly built, and had a swaggering gait. The other was short, rather slender, with a springy step, and very dark brown or black eyes, and red hair. At once they began to listen to an account of the evening's sensation.

"Oh, come now, you don't mean to say they're pickin' up this yere Soft Hand for pluggin' a man at that ding-blasted Dog Hole Bar?"

The tall, stout man was Honest Frank, and he was interested at once.

"That's the size of it!"
"An' you're a leavin' ov 'em?"
"Tain't our chip."

"Why, dog-gone it, *that's in California!* What in thunder hez the sheriff o' Dog Hole Bar got to do with a man after he's got over ther Arrizonay line? This hyar's bloody murder. Say! this thing's got ter be looked inter. The men of this hyar camp ain't goin' to stand no such foolishness, an' don't you furgit it. It's got ter be regulated ef I hev to do it myself—me, an' my pard hyar, Lucky Luke, the Tough from Tucson."

Although Honest Frank was rather an outsider to the crowd, the mention of his companion's name had its influence, and his suggestion was not far from striking a popular vein.

"Somebody trot out this law sharp," he continued. "When a man comes browsing round whar he's no business it's just ez well to make him show up his hand. This thing ov lettin' an outsider scoop in ther ante on his blind without nary a question ez to ther size ov his hand ain't ther way we play poke, is it pard?"

"No sir-ree. That's not the style in Tucson. You just count us in to see fair play fur ther sport behind ther door."

The little red-headed man cast a fierce glance about him, and dropped his hands down to his belt; which was again graced with the inevitable revolvers.

Whether he knew him or not his eyes rested upon Tom Hayes, with something very like a challenge.

The sheriff from Dog Hole was full enough of courage, but he was gotten up entirely too gorgeous for the sympathies of the crowd, when his right to act was once questioned. He recognized that fact; but as he had no lack of self-confidence he never shrunk from the possible storm, but stepped quickly forward a pace or two, and planted himself directly in front of the two who seemed bent on giving trouble.

"I'm the man running this thing," he said, sharply. "I've got a warrant for him, and I mean to take him back to Dog Hole to swing for murder. The people there won't have long to wait."

"Kinder r'iled, ain't they? Despit sort ov coons they be, no doubt.—But don't it strike you they've all pretty much made up their minds?"

"They have indeed; and that's the reason I followed his trail until I ran him down here."

"An' ef they've all 'xpressed a 'pinion, an' made up ther' minds, how's ther' goin' to be a fair show fur him, unless we rig out a jury to go 'long back with him? Who war it he salivated? How do we know it wa'n't some coon that war reachin' fur his hip, an' this duck hed ter shoot from his pocket to save his own bacon?"

"I tell you it was a willful murder. He shot down one Herman Knox in cold blood."

"Hold on, stranger, right thar," interrupted the Tough. "I knowed thar was some shenanigan 'bout this. Ther man you call Soft Hand wa'n't within a mile o' Herman Knox when that same passed in his checks."

"And what do you know about it, pray?"

Tom Hayes had his hands still at his belt, and as he asked his question he was ready to draw at the drop of the chip, so to speak. He, too, had heard of the Tough from Tucson.

But Lucky Luke seemed in no hurry to press the rising quarrel to a sudden issue.

"What does I know about it, eh? I reckon I oughter know somethin' about ther case. I ain't lost my memory, nohow, an' ez fur Herman Knox—I plugged him myself."

"You plugged Herman Knox?"

"I did that very same—now mebbe some one wants to take me."

CHAPTER LXVIII.

COUNSEL FOR DEFENSE.

If Lucky Luke had according to reputation, shot less men in his time, his announcement might have been considered altogether a joke; but, knowing the man a little, and his record still more, no one was exactly certain how it was to be received. He might be simply boilin' over for a fight for fun's sake; or he might be a friend of the prisoner, seeking to effect his escape, or it might be a simple piece of gasconade. At any rate a man so crazy on the shoot had to be handled with some little care if an explosion was not wanted; and that last was what Tom Hayes was anxious to avoid, though he had too much nerve to be easily backed down.

At this assertion of the little red-headed man he smiled dryly.

"This man that I'm talking about, this Herman Knox, was shot at Dog Hole. He was there, do you understand; and as we've never seen you up our way yet you must be joking."

"I never joke; I tell you I shot Herman Knox, an' thar's ther tool that done ther job. Now tell me I lie ef you dare, an' I'll plant you right beside him, ef I hev to tote yer all ther way thar, an' dig the hole myself."

With a lightning motion the Tough drew from some hidden receptacle a heavy, double-barreled derringer, and cocking it as it came brought the shining tubes on a level with the breast of Tom Hayes.

At the same time Honest Frank stepped rearward a pace or two, until his back was against the wall, while his hand rested on his two hips, ready for work. Between them the two had Hayes and his immediate followers in their front, and well covered.

The sheriff from Dog Hole was not too fresh to see when the drop was on him; and not so tired of life as to insist on having Lucky Luke crook his finger. He did not want to crawfish, either, so he temporized:

"It may be as you say; probably it is, though it's the first I heard of it. I'll take your word for it that Jones of Cinnabar is an innocent man, and all that. But don't you see he's the man that's charged with it, and he's the man I hold the warrant against? You can come along with him though, and I don't think there'll be a speck of trouble in your swearing him out and yourself in. Dog Hole is a mighty liberal city that way. Sconer than miss I wouldn't wonder if they'd hang you both, if you insisted on it."

"Who wants to go to Dog Hole? Who's goin' to go thar? Us boys ov Arizonay ain't goin' to let no Califerny sheriffs crawl 'round over us. We run our own courts, an' tries our own men. Ef we let this thing go on how long d'yer s'pose it'd be till they jerked up every man that hed struck it rich, an' sent him across ther border, while they jumped in on his claim? Oh, I know Californy from the ground up; I've bin thar. Ain't it so, boys?"

The indignant eloquence of Lucky Luke had its effect; an unmistakable growl of assent was heard as Honest Frank added:

"Ef a man can't git justice hyar, in Arizonay,

what's ther use to tote him off to Dog Hole? I move we hev a jury right hyar, now, to examine this case. Ef ther court decides he's guilty, waltz him right along to Dog Hole. Ef it ain't proven, hyar's ther habberas copperas document that will talk fur him ef they don't turn him loose."

His hands moved an inch or two until they touched the butts of the revolvers in his belt.

"That's so. If there's any trial goin', right here is ther place ter hev it; cl'ar ther deck an' open ther court."

So exclaimed one of the converts, but Tom Hayes, badgered a little too much for his endurance, retorted in short, angry tones:

"The man that tries any nonsense with me and my prisoner dies. I've got the law on my side; break it if you dare."

The broad challenge was a mistake. At his words out came more than one revolver, and then there was the sound of a sudden shot, followed by a yell, and the Silver Hall was a scene of wild excitement.

But it was neither Tom Hayes nor Lucky Luke that fired the shot, nor any one who had been at all identified with the case.

On the contrary, it was one of three who had lately arrived at the scene of action.

Ben Blake and his two comrades, followed Soft Hand and Kate Knox to the door of the Silver Hall, but they hesitated about going in; though so far they had had no quarrel with him. It was possible that Jones might recognize them as the men he had undoubtedly seen lurking in the shadows. Even if he did not, as they had designs on his well-filled purse, if nothing further, it seemed imprudent to be seen loitering in his wake. As, however, the room was well filled and it was important to procure information, Burro Bill, after an interval of a few minutes, followed in; while the two went on a little further to a canvas-covered shanty in whose ownership Ben Blake boasted.

They were waiting there in gloomy silence when Burro Bill returned in haste, with intelligence of what was going on at Silver Hall.

A few words sufficed to explain what had taken place.

"An' they're taken him back to Dog Hole in the morning?" inquired Ben Blake, thoughtfully.

"That's about the lay-out, ez fur ez I got inter the right ov ther game."

"They took his pop guns, but left him his buckskin ov slugs?"

"Thet's ther kind o' durned fools they seem ter be."

"Now don't it strike yer ez rank wickedness ter let sich a thing be did? They kin take ther galoot, an' welcome; but robbin' Arizony ov ther circulatin' mejum, sca'se ez it is, ar' more ner I kin stan' 'round an' see did. We must have it, an' we'll go fur it, ef thar's law er justice in this camp."

"The very indentikle idjea that struck me; but how ar' we to git it?"

"Eyes open an' fingers ready. Nothin' like bein' on ther spot. Ther fust chance we see, grab in! Come on, Baby."

The Baby was stretched at full length in the corner of the shanty. He had had very little to say; only watching the others in sulky silence.

He did not move now, any further than to roll over on his side, to more conveniently get at the plug of tobacco from which he proceeded to help himself liberally.

"Thankee, boys, fur ther chance; but I know when I got a soft thing, an' when I ain't. Stun ther sport outen his dummy, ef you kin, an' I won't ask fur my regulers. Take ther risk an' ther profit together; I'll stay hyer an' snooze."

"Ha, ha! Ther Baby is chicken-livered after all. Blame my eyes ef I didn't allers think so."

"Call it what yer like," answered the Baby, totally unmoved by the coarse laugh of Burro Bill. "I reckon, now, that I know that Soft Hand; an' I don't want any in mine. He'd jist scoop this hull durned crowd in, 'thout winkin'. He's a sport on wheels when he gits started; an' don't yer furgit it."

"He kin shoot, kin he?"

"Shoot? That's no name fur it. I seen him knock a pipe outen a man's mouth at forty yards, an' ther time were afore daylight too. He's jist drawin' them chaps on now; but afore mornin' you'll hear things howl. Count me out."

Whether the Baby had any other, and

private reasons for staying behind could not be told. As he seemed obstinately bent on not leaving, and as time was too precious to waste quarreling with him, Ben Blake gave a parting growl, and hastened away with Burro Bill.

For some minutes after their departure the Baby retained his recumbent position. He had been in good enough earnest when he refused to accompany his partners; but after they left, the loneliness became peculiarly oppressive, and at last he could stand it no longer. He leaped to his feet, felt of his revolvers, blew out the light that feebly glimmered in an old lantern, and all alone started for Silver Hall, impelled by a strong curiosity to see what was going on there.

He arrived just as the Tough from Tucson, backed by Honest Frank, was laying down the points of Arizona justice, as understood by him.

Harper's presence was not reassuring, though there was little danger that he knew who had been his assailants a few hours back, unless Madam Pharisee had broken her pledge. If she had done so there would most likely have been trouble at the time of his entrance into Mike's saloon. As there was not the Baby had hopes that it was still a secret. He entered the room and advanced boldly toward the crowd at the further end.

Hardly had he made his appearance, however, and certainly before he had got two yards from the door, when he distinctly saw Ben Blake raise the skirt of his coat and point it toward him, with his right hand hidden in the pocket. It was a furtive movement that perhaps those nearer would hardly have recognized, but the Baby saw it, and remembered it as long as he lived.

The next instant there was the muffled sound of a shot, followed by a cry; and then, with a tremendous crash, the Baby fell like lead to the floor, with a splotch of blood high up on his forehead, to show where the bullet had struck him.

Almost at the same instant Honest Frank half wheeled and struck out at Blake. He was getting even without knowing it.

It was a tremendous blow, and sent the recipient rolling heels over head, staggering several who were in the line of his march. Then there was a crash, the lights went out, and all was confusion worse confounded.

CHAPTER XIX.

JONES OF CINNABAR SPREADS HIS WINGS.

MR. JONES, of Cinnabar, had taken a very philosophical view of matters from the first.

In fact, he always did take things as they came, without any superfluous complaints, or expressed surprise. Some men would have shown astonishment at the appearance of Kate Knox; but he did not. Other men, again, might have shown anger, or nervousness, or some other natural feeling, at the appearance of the sheriff from Dog Hole; but he accepted it as a matter of course. If he had had a chance he would have fought strong enough, no doubt; but he had no chance, and so, very sensibly, he refused to darken counsel by words without wisdom.

When he was ushered into the room that was to serve as his place of confinement until morning, he gave a searching glance around him; but with two revolvers all cocked and ready there was not much chance for him to show his ability as an "escapist. Art could do no more than his perfect simulation of unconcern as he threw himself down upon the bed, and apparently composed himself for slumber.

Only once did he utter a word.

"Wake me up when you're ready to start in the morning. I suppose I'll sleep like a log; I had an awful hard ride of it to-day. I needn't have been in such a hurry if I'd known everything; but a man will make a mistake now and then."

"We won't leave without you," growled one of the guards, in answer; and then the prisoner closed his eyes, and for a little while the only sound heard in the room was the strong, regular breathing of the three men.

A noise outside finally attracted the attention of the two guards.

"Keep yer eye on him close fur a minute, Jack," said one. "I'll squint outen ther winder. Pears to me ther's suthin' ter look at."

"Go ahead with yer circus, I've got him kivered. He may be asleep, though I reckon he's only throwin' off. He knows ef he winks twice to the pound I'll plug him on s'pcion."

Soft Hand did not wink, however. There was not a movement to indicate that he heard a word that was said; and the first speaker leaned out of the window for a moment, seeming to take a careful and long look at things around and below.

"What d'yer see, anyhow?"

"I see Bob sittin' down on a stove-box, with both sixes out, an' the hammers draw'd."

"If that's all you kin do you can't see worth a cent. What else?"

"Thar seems to be fun afloat in ther s'loon, 'cause I kin hear them a-tunin' up, an' ther crowd's all gone in. I'll bet even money Tom hez a fight afore he leaves this yere camp."

"That's counted on. Ary thing else? Who made the noise?"

"Sure ez yer live it's a small boy. Durn yer small boys! He ain't thar fur nothin'. I swear I b'lieve he's thar to try an' hilp him out!"

"Don't be a fool. What sorter stock is he?"

"Like all sich. I wouldn't wonder ef he war whistlin' to the pris'ner now."

They looked keenly at Soft Hand, but if he was not sleeping he played the part wonderfully well. The whistling was lost on him.

"Couple ov hosses jist down the street a few rod. Looks mor'n ever s'picious. Keep yer eye on him, pard, an' drop him if he jumps. Thar's goin' to be fun, sure. I hear it louder'n ever."

The man leaned further out of the window, as he caught fragments of conversation floating out through the open door.

Then there came the sound of a pistol-shot, a cry, a chorus of yells, and the noise of heavy falls, while the light that had streamed through the windows and doors suddenly disappeared.

"They're at it," breathlessly exclaimed the one guard, while the other, starting to his feet, dropped the muzzle of his revolver out of level, and half turning listened at the door.

That was the moment the seeming sleeper chose to act.

With a powerful jerk he cast the pillow on which his head had been resting at the light that burned on the shelf across the room, and almost in the same instant caught up bed and bedstead and flung it on the guard at the door.

Jack went down and the light went out together, while Soft Hand, leaping forward, caught the man at the window by the heels and canted him head-foremost through the opening into the street.

All this could not be done without some noise, but the pandemonium in the larger room effectually drowned the sounds; and it was only when Jack had emerged from under the rude mattress, and had fired a shot at the vacant window, that the alarm was given.

Hayes, at the report, knew that something had happened, and had little doubt but that Honest Frank and his partner had started a fracas to draw attention from the little room while the prisoner was escaping. Dark though the saloon was his head was clear enough; and leaving the struggling mass to take care of itself he gave a bound for the door, which burst from its hinges at the shock, and leaped into the room.

Lamp or no lamp he could see the open window now, from which that minute Jack had sprung.

The instant that worthy struck the ground he shouted:

"Thar they go!" and opened fire.

Hayes sprung out of the window, too; but it was no use. He caught just one glimpse of three horsemen flitting away; and then they disappeared in the darkness.

"I reckon they've lit out fur Walnut Camp," said Honest Frank, as he strolled coolly out. "That's the camp they hang sheriffs that come nosin' 'round; mebbe you wouldn't think o' follerin' 'em?"

He approached the sheriff from Dog Hole as unconcernedly as though he did not know he was raving mad; and there were plenty there who expected to see trouble in earnest.

But Hayes was too busy to more than notice him. It might still be possible to overhaul the fugitives if once mounted, and he and his men darted away in search of their horses.

Honest Frank turned also, but in the other direction. As he did so he felt a touch on his elbow and glancing hastily down, an unknown boy placed in his hand a bit of paper.

"She said you were to read it right off," said this boy, and then he scurried away, as though fearful of being interrogated.

"She," said Harper to himself. "Who in thunder is she?"

He had actually forgotten the existence of Madam Pharisee, and turned the note over with a puzzled air.

Then he suddenly remembered that he had placed himself in the hands of a woman, and he felt more puzzled than ever.

The lights in Silver Hall were once more shining, but he did not care to go back just now. There was a little ten by twelve doggery across the street where he was not known, and which he judged was thoroughly emptied of customers by the *emeute* at the Hall.

He went thither; and found it as he had expected, occupied only by the bar-tender, who was also the proprietor, and who was looking anxiously out of the one window of the shanty, evidently debating whether he could safely lock his door, and go see what was the true cause of the excitement.

Honest Frank made himself very much at home. After calling for a glass of the villainous liquor which was there dispensed he leaned over the bar so as to get a better light, and managed to read his letter.

It was short enough; though something of a puzzle, really.

"A man named Jones at the Silver Hall. Keep an eye on him, and follow him if he leaves the city, even if it takes you into the Gulf of California. If you can find a partner whom you can trust take him with you. Protect the girl."

"PHARISEE."

"He's gone, sure enough; and when such a bird starts to running there is no telling when he will stop. I reckon I kin foller—fur enough to git ther top of my brain-box blowed in."

While Honest Frank was thus rather ruefully considering his letter—wondering in fact whether it would not be a good idea to suddenly forget his knowledge of the three R's, and then rely on his inability to read the very neatly written note, a man came through the doorway, and advanced to the light.

He came so quietly that the first indication the puzzled Harper had of his presence was seeing him lean over to read a letter in every way similar to his own.

There could hardly be any mistake about it; but to make sure Honest Frank peered over his shoulder at the risk of his brain-pan, and caught a glimpse of the "Pharisee" at the bottom.

"Well, I'll be hanged, pard! So you've got a letter too! Wonder ef we're in the same boat?"

Lucky Luke turned quickly enough, as though, up to that time, he had not recognized the presence of his lately made friend. He did not look altogether pleased at the sight, and might have said something in accordance with his looks had not Harper, as he turned, made a hasty sign with his fingers.

It was the hailing sign taught him by Madam Pharisee; and the answering signal came, swift and correct, though a little stare of wonder seemed to drift into the eyes of the redheaded man.

"Trade letters, pard; an' I'll bet yer a dollar you'll find 'em writ with ther same stick. I kinder understand now, why you were a-putting up fer that chap. Ther madam hes an interest in him, an' you war usin' me ter kerry it out."

Lucky Luke laughed carelessly.

"That's about ther breadth ov it—though I didn't want yer ter find it out. Ef we're goin' to foller, though, we'd better be on ther road. Ef he gits too much start men ner angels couldn't run him to a hole."

"Thet's so, pard; but thar ain't much use follerin' on foot, an' ez fur a hoss—I ate mine up long ago."

"Kerrect; an' I've got ther four-footed extract ov lightnin' thet kin kerry you. Kim along!"

"But, say! I ain't in fur any bloody murder. I kin hold my own with most men, an' I wouldn't mind a set-to with knife, pistol er fiets—but I want it fair an' square. No bushwhacking. Thet ain't my name."

Lucky Luke laughed again; but this time grimly.

"When I git through with him you can have your show, any way you want it; but I'd drop you in your tracks if you played him foul. Come on now."

Together the two left the little whisky-mill.

CHAPTER XX.

THE GRATITUDE OF PAULA QUEMADURA.

MR. JONES of Cinnabar, otherwise known as Soft Hand, and sometimes called the Silent

Sport, was a potent manipulator of the pistol and pack, and had courage for a dozen; but if left to his own devices would have probably found considerable difficulty in getting clear away from Tom Hayes.

By this time it is probably an open secret that the latter had more than an ordinary liking for Kate Knox, who was altogether a different looking young lady from the average belle of the mines. He had nerve enough and was handsome to boot, so that it was no indication of insanity for him to think that if he had anything like opportunity he might stand as good a chance as any other man.

It was this interest in Kate that caused him to enter so keenly upon the pursuit of the supposed murderer of her father. When it was too late he found that his theory was the very one that was least acceptable to her, and after that sheer obstinacy had a great deal to do with keeping him to his work.

When Kate disappeared he was absent, and that gave her a couple days' start. In that time, though she had departed in the stage, she managed to vanish utterly; and in looking for her he accidentally struck the trail of the Sport from Cinnabar, and followed it up until here, at last, he effected his capture.

He did not intend to let him go either, in spite of the seeming infatuation of the girl, whose appearance now gave him a twinge of jealousy; at which he tried to laugh, but which cut him none the less. He made his preparations with foresight, and as he did not believe it possible that there would be a general rising of the camp, he had no fears, though he had a thorough respect for the powers of his captive.

Honest Frank would scarcely have, of his own accord, moved in the matter, though there was a question now between them that he wanted some day to settle. It was the little red-headed sport that pushed him on; and between them they had a fair share to do with the escape from Silver Hall.

Yet that was only a link in the chain, and Soft Hand would have hesitated about taking the chances if there had been nothing else. When he threw himself down on the bed he had a very good idea that he could manage the two guards; but he was not so certain what could be done afterward. He was considering that while he was pretending to sleep, when he heard the conversation of his guards.

There seemed to be a chance for him at last. It was possible that the horses were being brought out for his benefit, and the whistle, which he could hear quite plainly, might be a signal. If not, the gathering storm in the next room might help him, and he would run the risk of being hung for a would-be horse-thief sooner than go back to Dog Hole, where, he could easily understand how much the chances were against him if the girl and Tom Hayes spoke the truth, of which he had not a doubt.

But the horses were for him, and a plan of escape had already been marked out. Hayes had been somewhat puzzled at not being able to find Kate Knox, for though the Silver Hall was the largest place in town, it did not take long to go through it, and it was evident that unless carefully concealed she was nowhere in it. As he was afraid to risk too long an absence he gave up the search after he once became satisfied that to prosecute it further would take him all over the city.

The fact of the case was that when the girl, after her passionate appeal, was turning away, with some sort of half-formed idea about aiding the captive, and was puzzling her wits how to begin, unexpected aid suddenly presented itself.

Right behind her, and peering over her shoulder into the room, were several interested spectators, that had popped up from Heaven knew where. In such cases no one attempts to explain the mystery of the crowd. From them Kate heard several refreshing expressions of sympathy. A man of the personal appearance of Mr. Jones would not want for admirers under any circumstances.

As these expressions were vague and pointless, she gave little heed to them, but passed on out through the other door, turning her face upward toward the cloudless heavens, in search of inspiration. In all her nomadic life she had never been fairly at fault, and she did not intend to give in now.

Just then she felt a touch upon her shoulder.

"Thou art the friend of *el barba bronce*?

Good. He is the man worth to die for. Paula would almost die for him herself. He is very brave, and once saved her life when Manuel held his knife to her throat. How can she pay him now?"

Kate wheeled sharply and bent her eyes keenly on the speaker.

Although they stood in the shadow of the building, there was light enough to make out a female form clad in Mexican style.

"Who are you? What can you do for him and me?"

"I am Paula Quemadura, and a woman. The man with the bronze beard once saved my life; I would risk much to save his or aid his friend. Thou hast courage? If so, he has need of it, or thy friend is lost. On the *jornada* they will hang him; for though the young man is honest, there are others with him who are pledged to his death."

"I fear it, I fear it; but what can be done?"

"Paula will help him. She has had an eye on him since he came hither, and knows what is for the best. We will bring the mustangs hither, and thou wilt give him the signal. None know the ways of the mountains and plains better, and once on his horse he is safe."

"You are an angel!" exclaimed Kate, enthusiastically clasping her hand. "A woman for gratitude yet! But I go with him. Once in the saddle, it will take a host to stay us."

"A host indeed; but there is little time for talk. Come! The senorita has a noble mustang also; and they must be found—though Paula's eyes have not been idle, and her hands are ready. But if the senorita would really go with the man of her heart, it is not in that dress she should follow him. Paula can manage that too. Go not back into the house. There is a hut over yonder where she can find shelter until everything is ready. If she is willing, let the senorita come; if not, Paula Quemadura will manage all herself."

"Do you think I would fail him? No! I know nothing of you save that you offer to aid him for a reason that I can well believe to be true. You cannot harm him, and so I trust you, and am ready."

This was the way it happened that there was a woman and a boy waiting a little distance away from Silver Hall, only, the woman was a weird-looking Mexican, and the boy was the only half-disguised girl, who was risking everything on an effort to save Soft Hand from those who professed to be minions of the law, but whom she considered to be but little better than Vigilantes.

When Soft Hand leaped through the window he landed right on top of the man that he had just tumbled out. As he was expecting it he only made it count to his advantage. The man quit struggling and lay like a log, while Jones hastily snatched up his revolver and ran on.

"This way, this way!" cried an earnest voice.

The voice was the voice of Kate, though the garments were those of an unknown quantity.

He had no doubts now, however, and followed the boy without hesitation.

"Up you go!" he said, and catching the young guide by the shoulders tossed him lightly into the saddle, and then threw himself upon his own mustang without touching mane or stirrup. He scarcely noted the third person, the Mexican woman, who was already mounted, and holding the other two horses by the bridle.

"Let go!" he cried. "We are off at last!"

Together the three dashed away.

By good luck, and through the lateness of the hour, there was not a horseman on the street, and the chances for escape were a hundred to one. A man on a galloping horse at midnight is an uncertain mark, and the bullets from Tom Hayes's pistol flew wide as they surged off into the darkness. Without doubt by the time the sheriff from Dog Hole could mount himself and followers the fugitives could have a start of a mile.

There was a little time to spare, therefore, and Soft Hand sought to utilize it. He took the river road trusting to luck to enable him to make a blind trail that would throw his pursuers altogether out, and lead them away to Walnut Camp. The others followed him without a word.

Then, suddenly they dashed against a lariat stretched out across their path, there was a blundering fall, and half a dozen men rose around them with cocked revolvers.

CHAPTER XXI.

GOOD-BY TO GILA.

ALTHOUGH the members of the Red League had vanished so suddenly upon the coming of Honest Frank, they had by no means given up their schemes and intentions. The simple fact was, no arrangements had been made for killing Lucky Luke, nor did they, until they had drained him of all the information they believed him to possess, intend to do anything of the kind.

As it was impossible to remain now, without a battle, the leader showed his discretion by giving a signal to retreat; and the rest of the men showed their complete subordination by immediately obeying it. They dived away into the shady recesses around them; and even the three who had been summarily knocked down crawled hastily away from the dangerous neighborhood.

It only took a few moments to reorganize the campaign, but in those few minutes their intended victims had so well occupied the time that they had utterly vanished.

How they had shortly afterward reappeared in the city at Silver Hall, and put an extra, and very unacceptable spoke in the wheel of the sheriff from Dog Hole, the reader has already seen, but it has not been explained that the leader of the League, who was none other than the Victor Page, who has already been introduced with the other characters at Dog Hole, leaving his men outside of the camp, had followed on in. Having a keener scent than most men, he not only took in the situation in the saloon at a glance, but he discovered the intentions of the two women, and putting everything together decided on his course and hastened back in search of his allies.

The climax came sooner than he had expected. He was just explaining matters as far as it seemed necessary, and pointing out that it would be worth their while to interview this Mr. Jones before he permanently retired, when the galloping of the approaching horses was distinctly heard.

Quick, almost as thought, he acted. The lariat was stretched on the chance of gathering them in, and well hidden by the darkness, the League waited.

The suspense did not last long, for right into the trap the three rode at full speed.

Soft Hand happened to be a shade in advance, which was well for them all. He rode the heaviest horse, and the rope was stretched a little too high to do its work well. If it had been lower down it would probably have swept all three together in a crumpled heap, but as it was the heavy mustang of the man from Cinnabar was flung backward and to the ground, but at the same instant the rope broke, and the two pulled up uninjured.

It might not be safe to venture an opinion as to just how far the Sharp was thrown, as it might throw doubts upon the statement that he alighted on his feet, though such was actually the fact. Perfect horseman that he was he understood the situation at once, and acted accordingly, though he was a little dazed and a good deal shaken by the shock.

"Surrender!" exclaimed Victor Page, leaping toward the man who was reeling away into the darkness. Well as he knew him he had no idea that he would attempt resistance against such odds.

With pistol in one hand, and the other hand outstretched, he advanced as the other retreated. Of course he could have shot him down then and there, but that was not what he wanted. There is an uncertainty about the confessions extorted by a pistol ball. They sometimes cease suddenly. A rope is a much more reliable instrument of torture.

"Put up your pop gun, then. I reckon there's no surrender in this crowd until we find out the platform you're standing on. If you mean the square thing we might talk about it."

"This is no time for talk. Hold up your hands or down you go."

Two men had already caught the bridle of Paula Quemadura and the apparent boy and were holding them in check with certain aim. They were captured beyond remedy, and that left five armed men to look after Soft Hand. He took in the situation, and up went his hands.

"There they are, pard; gather me in. But I'd like to know what in thunder it's all about. If you're agents you'll starve afore long on suck pickings as you get here, and if—"

He did not finish the sentence.

Deceived by the hearty carelessness of the man Page approached uncautiously, and in an

instant his heels were kicked from under him and he fell in a heap.

It was one man against six now; and as that one was the man from Cinnabar the odds were not so great. As Page went down Jones sprung toward his mustang, which had staggered to his feet and was standing quivering as a horse will sometimes do after a fall.

A bound or two and he had a tight grip on the reins, and his revolver out.

Once, twice the weapon spoke; and as he was cool as an iceberg and a very champion of shots, he put the bullets just where he wanted them. The two men that were pretending to take care of his companions had time for a yell before they tumbled to the ground, and that was all. Then there was a rattling, random volley, and amid a spray of spattering bullets the three dashed away unharmed.

This time there was no more a question of blind trails, and the like. The affair with the Red League, which was, of course, inexplicable, had taken up so much time that straightforward flight, or surrender to the crowd that was trooping out from the city were the only alternatives.

But Soft Hand had no thought of surrender. Turning, he sped straight for the mountains of the Gila, and the desert that lay beyond, while silently at his side rode the two who had aided him in his strait at Silver Hall. As yet, there were no horsemen on the trail, but the chances were that before long there would be a race that would test both steeds and riders. Until that time came, after a fair offing had been made, Soft Hand looked curiously at his friends.

He had already recognized the voice of the boy, else, under that guise he would never have suspected who or what he was.

The woman puzzled him more. He guessed that she was Mexican from her costume, and because, though dressed as a woman, she rode astride, and seemed thoroughly at home in the saddle. Further than that he could not go. He did not remember, on the spur of the moment, any Mexican senora that would be likely to befriend him, and the uncertain light scarcely revealed her face with sufficient clearness to enable it to offer any suggestions.

"This is business for a modest man," he remarked, lightly. "About how far do you expect to go on this trail, and what's the kind of lay-out you intend to spread for your little game when we get there? Why, woman alive, this is no place for you to be drifting! And as for you, senorita, you'll excuse me, but I can't make you out. I'm grateful, and all that, but I like to know who my pards are when I'm reefing right into a hot place."

"Thou hast then forgotten Paula Quemadura? It is well. Yet will she still remember, which is better. At the *bayle* where Black Miguel sought the life of her brother, *el Americano* risked his own, and saved her, too. They were ten to one, but of that what? They had the hearts of the coyote, and dared not to face those revolvers of thine. Caramba! Dost thou not remember the *danza* at Tucson where they slew the three men from the mountains and then ran like goats from before thee. It was because of Paula Quemadura that the trouble began, and I am she. When I saw thee in trouble I said to thy friend, Paula will save him and thee. So I will ride with thee a little, for none knows the country better; and it may be that I can serve thee yet more."

The woman spoke with a Mexican accent, yet like one who had passed much of her time among those who spoke the English in its purity. What her life had been, judging from the brief, hazy story she told, it was not hard to guess. If it had been a man speaking, his words would have perhaps been a warning to beware; but the women of Mexico seldom betray, however hardened they may be, and Soft Hand seemed unwilling to trouble his mind trying to recall facts that very well might be true.

"So be it," he said. "I remember something about Tucson, and a dance, and some foolishness that happened about a thousand years ago, and it's as likely as not that you were there; but all the same I guess you had better go back. I don't know where this trip is going to wind up, and I reckon you'll only get into trouble if you back my hand."

"I dare not go back now; let me ride a little further. When the time comes I will say farewell and go on to my friends in Altar. I was on my way."

"Oh, I'm not going to drive you off, and if

this youngster here is going to stick by me perhaps it might be as well, after all, if you stuck to the party till we pull up at the end of the trail. Only remember one thing. When we get there I won't be the boss; and if the party that is thinks you can't hold your tongue he may cut it out to make sure of it. Come or stay, now, just as you choose."

"Paula has no tongue at all," answered the other, bowing resignedly. "She will go."

So the three rode on together. They were all excellently well mounted, and each had revolvers, while strapped to her back Paula Quemadura carried a short rifle. To the saddles hung canteens and haversacks. In fact they were well equipped for a long journey.

CHAPTER XXII.

ADRIFT IN THE DESERT.

"I tell you, pard, I've got as much sand as the next man, an' I like you clean than an' back ag'in, an' hev since I first seen yer; but I'm like ther most ov ord'nary humans, an' I want ter know somethin' ov ther game I'm goin' ter buck ag'in'? Ef this hyar Soft Hand is ter be took inter camp I want yer to no-tise he's no slouch."

"Yer in ther ring now, no back down, an' I guess it won't do no hurt to tell yer ther story ez Madam Pharisee told it ter me. I'll swear part ov it's gospil; an' ther balance we may ez well take on trust."

The speakers were Honest Frank and the Tough from Tucson. It was a little after sundown and the two were encamped near a spring of clear water.

They were just upon the edge of the desert which stretched away to the south for an indeterminate distance in miles. They were resting themselves and mustangs here before striking out on the arid plain that lay before them, and upon which it was no child's play to venture. As yet they had found no traces of Soft Hand, and Honest Frank, moved by curiosity, sought some answer to the question of why this persistent following up.

"I'll cut it right down an' stuff it inter a nut-shell. There's another man that oughter be in ther game—but he's dead. The way of it's this. He used ter be this Madam Pharisee's husband, an' his name was Herman Knox. After breakin' her faro-bank one night he took a promenade with this same Soft Hand, and somebody shot him, stole his body an' went on to the next town. Ther madam's rich enough but she wants ter git all she kin, and keep all she gits. She war ready to foller on to ther next town too, fur ther wasn't a shadow of doubt but what, afore Knox passed in his checks, he give ther Cinnabar chap a raft ov money ter keep fur him an' his darter."

"An' whar is ther darter?"

"I reckon she's dead too. Leastwise she vanished."

"Thar yer mistook, pard, unless I'm clär out; but go on with ther catekism. Soft Hand was ther; why didn't she salivate him? What's ther ust o' waltzin' all over the State o' Sonora?"

"Thet's ther question, is it? Well now I'll show whar ther idear kims in. I reckon this yere Knox hes struck it powerful rich, somewhere down South. They say he's got a gold mine whar they scoop up ther nuggets with a shovel, an' roll 'em away in a wheelbarrel. Somewhars it's; but whar? They say, too, that he's bin up in 'Frisco huntin' up a land-grant that kivers the hull ground. Sich a grant than is, an' it's more ner likely he hes it. Ther madam warn't posted on this at first; but she got some sorter inklin' ov it, an' now she's hot ter find whar it ar'. Bein' a widder ov ther dead man, an' ther mother ov his darter it stan's ter reason she could handle ther place to advantage. An' ef she makes ther rifle she'll pay you well. She's taken a shine ter you, I sorter believe; an' when she gives her hand she's square from ther ground up."

Honest Frank shugged his shoulders.

"It would take a young army fur ther sort ov a job; does she think you an' me kin take ther hull State of Mexico?"

"Go slow, pard. Ain't you an' me a young army? She ain't no fool. We kin do more ner a dozen, an' when we git it down ter a fine point it'll be time enough ter drum up recruits."

"Thet's so. Now what's ther game in hand?"

"Ter foller up this yere Soft Hand, an' find whar he's goin'. Ef we kin do it 'thout throwin' him offen his route, clean out his pockets;

but all ther time let him go on. He won't stop till he gits thar. Then he kin retire. We've no more use fur him, an' ther sooner he's under ther ground ther better."

"Thankee, pard; I see it all now, cl'ar ez ther Tahoe. But I say it ag'in, I never shoot at ther back ov a man I'm afeard to waltz up in front ov. Count me outer ther bush-whackin', an' charge it in ther bill."

"Right you are. Stick by us till we locate his lay-out an' I'll 'tend ter him myself."

"But, say. S'pose, when we've found him out, an' got ther game on a string, I'd furgit ther madam an' stake out ther claim fur meself; what c'u'd she do? 'Pears ter me she's puttin' a wonderful sight o' faith in a floatin' party she just picked up?"

"I'll be thar, pard; an' I kin look arter her interests. When we shoot together we'll both drop, no doubt; but Honest Frank won't hev no furder use fur claims—this side er ther range."

"Thet sounds very much like a threat; an' I don't take many ov that sort from no man, even a pard. Pitch it a bit lower down, er they'll be a leetle red-headed sport from Tucson short when ther madam calls ther roll. You hear me?"

The two looked keenly at each other. They were one in good-fellowship, yet they had their suspicions.

Neither drew, however, since between such chiefs they would have meant the death of one or the other, and perhaps both. This was not the time or place for idle flourishes.

"That's good enough, then. We hang together. It's a forty-eight hour gallop afore us, an' I ain't keerin' to cut loose an' try it onless my pard an' me calkerlates ter hang together till ther last gasp. Ther's some awful wicked things bin done out thar in them sand-hills."

"Gimme yer hand ag'in, pard; I'm with yer clean through. Thar's stoppin'-places on ther road, ain't ther?"

"'Pends on how yer strike it. I reckon on hittin' a water-hole along about sundown to-morrer, an' I'll sooner reach it a leetle later. Thar's two on 'em some leetle piece apart; an' ef we find any camper at the one we kin try t'other."

"You think ther's a chance to strike him thar?"

"Him er his trail. It ain't an easy job; but since I know what ther contract is I think I kin kerry my end."

It was no slight boast, for the speaker knew very well the dangers of the desert before him; but he spoke confidently and meant what he said. He had faced so many perils in his life that an adventure without its hazards would have scarcely been worth the undertaking. He had expected to overtake or at least find traces of the fugitives here, and having failed was satisfied that his next cast would intersect their line of march. If the story of Lucky Luke did not explain everything it at least threw a plausible light on the intentions and desires of the generous madam.

It is true she had led him to believe that she intended to take the journey herself, and in his company, but her absence was decidedly a relief, and he thought none the less of her courage and a great deal more of her judgment since she had decided to find out how the land lay before venturing herself on what might prove to be a bootless expedition. He was better satisfied to have the Tough from Tucson as a partner in the preliminaries, and it was with a feeling of exhilaration that he found himself bounding across the arid plain after their season of needed rest.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ROBBED AND DESERTED.

HONEST FRANK was a walking compendium of geography. The country he had not traveled over he had heard about; and whatever he had heard he had remembered. Putting this, that, and the other together, he had been able to guess with a great deal of shrewdness where to look for the three fugitives; though he was not so correct as to distances and times, nor could he always recognize far-away landmarks with the absolute certainty that he could have wished.

If he made any mistakes as to latitude and longitude it was not so wonderful as that he should have guessed the exact spot at which the man from Cinnabar was aiming, and was not far from the time at which if nothing prevented he should reach it. It was a singularly

lucky guess, because at the time that Lucky Luke was enlightening his guide and companion, and receiving the benefit of his opinions Mr. Jones was also encamped at the edge of the desert, and was indicating with his finger the course that he intended to take.

"It is a long ride," he said, pointing straight forward over the plain. "It is a long ride, and a hard one; and it may be the Apaches will stand in the road. Then it will be a race that will try a man. Make up your mind if you had not better turn back?"

He spoke to Paula Quemadura; but his eyes sought those of the seeming boy. He would not ask her to give up the trail, but he evidently had his idea on the subject.

Paula had hers also.

She shook her head in dissent.

"No, no, I turn not back. It is a long road but I have ridden a longer, and the danger is nothing new. What man can go further and fight harder than a daughter of the Quemadura? But it is not the true course. Yonder lies Tinajas Altar away eastward. It is safer much, and it would be better yet to strike the beaten trail."

"That is your best route if you are seeking Altar. This," pointing again southward, "is mine. Follow it or not; to me it makes no great difference. All the same I thank you again for what you have done for me. Shall we say good-by?"

"Not yet; yet the way is dangerous; follow it and see. Saints preserve us if we fall into the hands of the demon Apaches—man cannot!"

Thus it was that the three still galloped on together through the long day, and though they were knit so closely together in a common danger they said but little to each other. All the time the man from Cinnabar rode a little in front, choosing the way with unerring certainty, and keeping a keen eye for danger.

Yet at every place of vantage he cast a glance or two backward. How sharp the pursuit might be, and who would join in it, were questions that were not yet answered, but it was an unfortunate fact, that Tom Hayes, with all his jovial good-nature, was one of those, sleuth-hounds that once on the trail follow to the death. Unless the doubling game, that he had tried after getting fairly away from the Gila had succeeded it was likely that the man from Cinnabar would have him on his track; and it was doubtful whether even the Mexican border would stop him.

So, looking back for perhaps the hundredth time, just as he was turning the crest of a sandhill he saw away behind a few dark moving specks.

"The more the merrier!" said Soft Hand, gayly. "Brother Hayes may catch up and welcome here. It won't be hard to find a cover where long range won't do much good; and if they get in close those men from Dog Hole will never want to ride after an earthquake again."

It was only a glimpse, and then they shot downward and the black spots had vanished, but the other eyes were as sharp as his own.

"Some one follows," said Paula, pointing over her shoulder. "If they push closely there will be blood spilt on the desert; and they are two to one. It is the riders of the Red League."

"So much the better; they will need no funeral. Let them come. But I doubt if they reach us to-night. They follow a different trail."

Whether they were Tom Hayes and his men, or the members of the League, the pursuers did not again appear through the day. The sun was sinking low in the west, and half a dozen miles yet were to be covered before reaching the island in the desert at which Soft Hand was aiming when he suddenly reined in. For once too, he uttered a little exclamation of disgust—perhaps of dismay. Perhaps two miles away there was a slender, thread-like line of moving horsemen, whom even at that distance it was not hard to detect as Apaches, whose line of march led diagonally across their own course.

"Back!" he exclaimed, with a wave of his hand; and all three swung backward on their tracks, until, in a moment, they were out of range of vision. Then they dismounted, and the Sharp crept forward again, and lying at full length on the ground, watched the cavalcade.

"A fool for luck!" he muttered. "How did I come to choose the left-hand side? If I had kept to the right, or been an hour sooner, where

would we have been? And if— But good Lord, there's no use to borrow trouble! I've got enough of my own."

A hand dropped on his shoulder.

"Will you believe Paula now? Apaches in front, the Red League behind. Is it not the time for one wise to slip from between?"

"Slip be hanged. I'm not those kind. There is your way open; take it if you want to. I'm going *there*."

When he had made up his mind there was very little use to change it.

"But to go on. It is certain death."

"Reason in all things. Luck seems to be running right along in my hands; d'yer think I'm going to play it out changin' my deal? Take it easy, old lady, and stick to Jones of Cinnabar. You won't go under this hand, anyhow!"

"But if the other way be safer?"

A soft, pleading voice, began at his other elbow.

"There's just two chances anyway: You'll get through, or you won't get through, if you take a dozen roads. Don't fret yourself, little woman. You know I am steering a straight course just as well as I do. Time enough to squirm when the danger comes."

There was nothing more to be said. The two urged him no further. One was too angry the other too timid to speak. In silence they waited, watching the living thread until it wound itself out of sight.

Then, without sign of fear or hesitation, but with rather more haste than one would expect with such dangerous neighbors, the Sharp from Cinnabar led the way, still on the old line. They crossed the Apache trail, scarcely to be seen in the fading light, and finally knew by the quickening pace of their steeds that the much desired water was not far away.

"Luck ag'in," murmured Soft Hand. "I've seen the time when there wasn't a drop within fifty miles of here. I wouldn't have cared to cross here then, with this party in tow. Hold here a bit while I ride on ahead and see what the looks of the lay-out are. If you hear my sixes going, move off, and don't concern yourselves about me."

There was no sign of danger at the spring or little pond, which apparently had not been visited for many a day. Had there been ever so many foes in known ambush it would have been hard to avoid giving them their chance, since his mustang plunged forward, with a snort of delight, and began eagerly quaffing the welcome water.

In a few minutes all three were there together, and Soft Hand began his preparations for the night.

"Surely this is not the place to camp? It is dangerous here, and no safety until fifty miles are between us and the red robbers. Let us push forward while we can."

"Here we camp, all the same. I can't see what the red devils are doing hereabouts, and I hope they are just passing through. If not there will be some of the sickest looking 'Pash you ever saw, if they come fooling around here. Go to sleep, though; I will keep watch. Dangerous or not I don't move from here until I get ready."

"When I have slept a little I will take thy place. If I rise not when my guard turns comes, awaken me."

So Paula said, as she threw herself down, and was soon in a heavy slumber.

The night wore on. About midnight the Mexican woman opened her eyes. Jones was standing near with folded arms and a strange smile on his face, watching the too handsome boy.

"Pity it is," he muttered. "What is to be the end of this?"

Just then Paula touched him lightly.

"Ah!" he said, wheeling with a start. "Yer move like a snake. If you chose you could be as dangerous as an Apache."

"It is for the best to be quiet. Though no harm has yet come I would not trust the darkness. They lurk there—the red slayers—and the white slayers are not far away. Just at the blackest hour before morning look for them. Yet it is not too late. The mustangs once more are fresh and a day will take us out of danger. Why linger here?"

"There is no place that is out of danger; one spot is as far from harm as another, if the luck is in your favor. Go to sleep again. We will start in the morning."

"Better a thousand times if we started now; but be it as you say. Only rest thou while

there is a chance. An hour or two will be much worth. Of a verity, truly, without a doubt! Sleep; Paula will watch, her eyes are most keen."

The suggestion was no unpleasant one. Loss of sleep was beginning to tell on the man from Cinnabar, and a prospect for slumber was never more inviting. But little danger was there for the present; and most likely the Mexican woman could watch as well as he. He hesitated a moment; and then consented.

"No foolishness with fire-arms, but if you hear or see anything waken me at once. An hour's sleep will make me a new man. Don't let me lie longer."

The Mexican woman picked up her rifle and examined the lock to see that it was in thorough working order, and then crouched down on her post, while Soft Hand closed his eyes, composed his limbs, and almost instantly was asleep.

A quarter of an hour, half an hour, an hour passed by; and his long-drawn breath came as regularly as ever. Of the soundness of his slumbers there could not be a doubt.

Then Quemadura rose up and stole softly toward him, in an undertone muttering:

"The fool! He would die himself, and have us die with him. Sharp? Ha, ha! He is Soft Head, the flat. What can you do with a ragging madman? Yet shall I or shall I not? Yes!"

The last word was spoken firmer and louder. It must have reached the ears of the sleeper; had his repose been less deep it would have awakened him. As it was he stirred uneasily, though only for a minute.

Then the false sentinel knelt lightly by his side, with one hand clutching the haft of a knife, while the other with feathery touch explored the clothing around his breast, touching at last a suspicious protuberance.

"I have it!" thought the traitor, and drew the keen knife across the clothing.

No pickpocket could have worked the thing more deftly. Lifting a package from its hiding-place Paula arose, with a little gesture of triumph, and turned away.

Once she paused and looked at the girl; then, with a shake of the head passed on to where the mustangs were staked.

"My own is the fleetest—shall I take the rest? No! Leave them a chance. It would be murder in cold blood."

At that Jones awoke, and clapping his hand to his breast, sprung to his feet. Danger was in the air though he knew not which way to turn.

His first glance was for Kate.

The seeming boy was muttering unintelligible words, but lay in the same position which she had assumed hours before.

Just then Paula Quemadura was vaulting into the saddle.

With a shout Soft Hand leaped forward—but too late. There was the sound of a tearing gallop, a little cry of alarm, and then horse and rider vanished in the darkness.

By instinct the revolver of the man from Cinnabar had come out, and for a fleeting second covered the flying rider; but for once the finger of the sport refused to pull the trigger.

"The traitorous fool!" he exclaimed, and flinging the weapon back into its holster, he bounded toward his own mustang.

A slash of the knife severed the lariat, and without waiting for saddle or bridle, he dashed after the fugitive, leaving the now wakened girl desolate, alone and staring.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PAULA GOES FROM BAD TO WORSE.

CINNABAR CHARLEY's treacherous friend had told the truth in regard to the speed of the mustangs. Though for a time the race was evenly kept up, it was not long before Soft Hand began to drop behind, and at last he drew up alone on the desert.

He listened sharply, but there was no sound by which to direct his course, and as to sight—a hundred horsemen might be speeding away, and at a hundred rods be lost to view among the ridges of sand, and the shadows of the gaunt cacti.

"Served me right!" exclaimed the sharp, heartily. "The next time I drop to a little game and say nothing about it because I think it's all serene, I ought to lose my head. Drive on with your hearse if you think there's no hereafter; but it strikes me you're going to certain death. Better have let me run the game my own way and taken the chances.

Meantime, what has become of Kate? Confound the sex! They're bad medicine, anyhow!"

Having reached this ungallant conclusion, he wheeled deliberately and began to retrace his steps, casting his eyes about in fruitless attempts to recognize the surrounding sameness.

It was no easy task to find the camping spot, though it had been so lately left; and he trusted more to the instinct of his mustang than to his own skill. North, south, east and west he could tell by the stars; but in which exact quarter lay the little water hole was a matter of uncertain conjecture.

While he was picking his way back, the runaway and robber was a great deal more rapidly drifting eastward.

"I warned him, I warned him, and he was bent on running to death. Why should I care? Let him look out for himself now. Only it was a pity to leave the girl there. He may yet fight through if the red fiends come down on them; but what chance will there be for her? But then she gets no more than she deserves. Let it be so, since it could not be otherwise. For myself, I will strike for the Altar trail and safety."

The Altar trail, however, lay some distance, and there was a much nearer impediment. At the very moment this sage conclusion was being formed, a coarse voice, close at hand, ground out, in a low whisper:

"Halt and hands up. No nonsense or you're a goner."

As suddenly as though they were phantoms half a dozen dark forms sprung into view; a rude, nervous gripe on the bridle rein of Paula brought the halting mustang to a full stand; and around the captive, with cocked pistols, grouped the men of the Red League, with Victor Page at their head.

"Who have we here?" he asked, as he bent low in his saddle, and stared at the form before him, darkly limned against the background of the night.

Man or woman—it was hard at first to distinguish which; but he had hopes.

"It's ther cussed Mexican witch!" exclaimed one of the men, breaking in. "She's one of ther party. I oughter know, fur I war a-holdin' ov her bridle when ther Sport pinked me. Give her ther knife, captain, an' drive on. She'll serve us some devil's trick ef we don't."

"Hold, none of that," interposed Page, as his reckless follower made a motion toward putting his proposal into execution. "We are on the trail now. The rest can't be far off, and the thing is to find them. Two of you go on to see that he don't surprise us, and I'll examine her. What are we good for if we can't make her speak? Down with her, and we'll find out why she's left them, and where they are. Off with her."

"Mercy, senors!" exclaimed their captive, dismounting in haste. "Mercy and I will tell the truth."

"Yer better had!"

The man with the knife advanced and faced her so that there could be no opportunity for escape, while the others closed in around.

"Mercy is something not very much in our line," retorted Page. "It's bad policy for people that want no tales told. We're open to a trade though, and if you tell the truth I swear we'll give you a chance to get away. If you refuse to speak we'll wring the truth out of you if we have to grind your brains out and then put a tongue in each of your four quarters. The pieces will say, 'this woman was a fool and wouldn't tell the truth. We're missionaries, we are, and teach such heathens as you are to walk in the right road. Now go on. What were you doing with that man; what was he to you, or you to him; and what has become of him?'

"Mercy, senor, the whole truth will I tell. I am Paula Quemadura, and a poor woman that has known miserable grief. The man Jones once to me was a friend, and a woman of Sonora never forgets. When he is in trouble at Gila to me comes the young girl, his friend also, and I say to her, Paula has not forgotten. Let us be brave as the daughters of the South can be and we yet will save him. I go to my friends at Altar and if so he wills he can go thither also. There are mines there for the finding and some day there will be—"

"Cuise you and your rigmarole," interrupted Page savagely. "We know all that. Where is he now? No hesitation but speak at once. What has happened that you are separated? We know that you three entered the

desert together. The girl—has anything happened to her? She is more of a prize than the other."

As time elapsed, and nothing was heard of the others, Page grew anxious. He spoke more than he knew. He confused and hindered by his questions. He was almost ready for the answer.

Upward looked Paula, as if to draw inspiration from heaven.

"Danger has come; and *el barba bronce* is reckless and beyond advice. The men from Dog Hole seek him from the one side, the Apaches creep toward him from the other, yet he careless sleeps by the side of the water. Paula warned him and he would not move. Then she mounted her mustang and fled. She would rather seek the Altar trail of herself alone than hide in the desert with a *bobo*."

"And the girl. What of her?"

"She, too, will fall into the hands of the red scourges. She thinks there is but one man living, and that he of Cinnabar."

"How long since you left them then, and which way does their camp lie? Choose your words carefully; I have doubts of your telling the truth."

"Not an hour since; and they are by the springs yonder. There is yet time to save them."

"Jist ez I said, kunnel," one of the men broke in with some exultation in his tone.

"Oh, I'm a rooster to find a trail, I be. Didn't I told yer so? Ther ain't more ner five white men knows this trail; an' I'm ther boss ov 'em all."

"Hold your cursed yawp!" answered Page, sternly. "And woman, as for you, this story may or may not be the truth. If it is I'll be as good as my word; but you've got to prove it. Lead us back to the camp you have left, and you shall then go your own way."

"And face him I have abandoned? The sight of him would slay me, yet I was not ready to die with him. What is he to me that I should give up life because of his folly?"

"Yer gittin' too chipper acause yer hevin' a chance. You hearn ther captain's orffer. Take it quick—er this."

The group of men leaned forward.

"If she don't choose quick send her home," they growled in concert.

Eating its way through clothing and flesh came the keen point of a knife-blade. Paula felt the blood begin to trickle, and was powerless to move, for a pair of stout hands from behind held the victim to the blade. A little thrust and all would be over.

"Yes, yes, I promise! I will lead you. He can but kill me; and better trust his hands than yours."

"Mount then and move on; but the knife will be at your back now, and half a dozen revolvers that never miss. Betray us if you dare!"

"All ther same, capt'n, keep an eye wide open fur them 'Pash. It'll be no joke ef they're ther."

"Keep your own eyes open, and I'll back my own to be open for any money. Forward now; and see that the girl is saved alive. The man that harms her will settle with me. She is worth a million such cattle as this."

And so, with their captive guide leading the way, they moved on in search of Jones of Cinnabar.

"Remember," added Page. "No hesitation. The girl cannot harm us—make sure of the man. If he has five bullets in him when we find him I'll divide a thousand between you."

"Ha, ha! I reckon you've see'd him afore, then. Yer a volcaner ov hate, capt'n, er yer wouldn't be so liber'l with yer slugs. This ain't ther first time he's run ag'in' you an' yer plans?"

Page scowled darkly at the whispered words of the man at his elbow; and yet for the life of him he could not keep back the answer that rose to his lips.

"Yes, ten thousand curses on him. But it shall be the last. I know him of old. He balked me once, and brought my brother to his death. To-night I hope to pay the account of hate in full."

After all there was something more than lust of gold driving one of these men along the trail.

CHAPTER XXV.

A MAN WITH A PISTOL.

THE night had worn well along and the hour before day, that is said to be the darkest,

was near at hand. It was the time too when the Apaches would be abroad, if they were intending to make any attack upon the man from Cinnabar.

Of the Red League some there were who would gladly have turned and sought some safer stamping-ground; but Victor Page kept grimly on.

In truth he did not credit the story altogether. There is a vast difference between opinion and fact; and he fancied that the Mexican woman had been mistaken. He knew something of the man who seemed to have composedly settled down to pass the night in fancied security; and he believed that being thus warned if there had been a chance of danger he would not have listened with unheeding ears. He was willing to stake his own life upon the judgment of the very man he came out to slay.

"Is it much further?" he whispered after they had gone some distance.

"A mile peradventure—perhaps several. I rode as if the devil was behind me and only thought to get away."

"She's right, capt'n," broke in the man who had boasted of his knowledge of the trail. A bare mile it are. In line with yonder—"

He did not finish the sentence. In the midst of it came a startling, most unexpected interruption. In front, on either side, even behind rose up dark forms. Paula Quemadura had been no false prophet. It was the hour before daybreak and the Apaches were making their swoop.

Paula was as quick to perceive the changed state of affairs, as any of them; perhaps a shade quicker. She waited for neither shot nor yell, but snatching from her bosom a hitherto concealed revolver, she leveled it full in Victor Page's face.

Down he pitched from his horse, and at the same time a cry of dismay arose from his men, which was echoed back by an answering yell and a flight of arrows from the red-men.

But Paula never waited. As her finger tightened on the trigger her bridle hand gave to her rein a sudden wrench, and wheeling her mustang she bounded away as the rattle of revolvers, the cries of the Red League, and the fierce yells of the Apaches all blended into one horrible, confused thunder of sound.

It was chance perhaps, but there was wonderful quickness to take advantage of that chance. The one broke away unscathed, the many remained, overpowered, wounded, beaten back, but fighting gamely to the last.

Perhaps they did not at first see that one fugitive in the garb of a Mexican woman; Paula had already obtained a fair offing before the first shot was fired; and it was not until a minute or so had elapsed that a small squad of braves disengaged from the main body and followed hard upon her trail.

She rode harder though, and succeeded for the time being, in throwing those who followed triumphantly off the trail.

Then with an eye to attack and defense she turned again a little and dashed toward a little knoll, on which there were three cacti, all arranged in a row.

She approached them fearlessly; but out from behind one of them suddenly stepped Soft Hand, with his revolver already leveled.

"This here's too thin, my runaway friend. For a cent I'd plug you anyway. I'm done with you. Turn an' git some other way, and let me play the rest of this hand out alone."

"Wait, wait! I make no resistance, work your will; but why be angry? I saw the danger that you would not heed, and said, shall we both die? Then I thought—"

"That you'd rob me. Good enough. What is it that's behind you. It seems to be a rattling fight, but I guess it's not my chip in. I think I'll slay you, and light out."

"Oh no, you are jesting. Don't tell me you do not understand."

"I understand all about it, a good deal better than you do. But what's the racket below, and what has driven you back?"

"It is the hand of Providence. I left you because I scented danger that I could not guard against—I would not murder the girl in cold blood, and you are so reckless. Then I had worse luck yet, for I fell into the hands of Victor Page and his highwaymen to whom I told a straight story. They brought me back, but on them the Indians rose up from an *emboscado*. Then I had my chance at last, and holding my revolver very straight I shot him through the heart. I could not die and leave him behind."

"You did? Put it there, pard; I forgive you on sight—if you shell over. You squirm hard before the danger; and fight harder when it comes! I wouldn't have thought it of you. But this is no place for you and me; and I'm afraid the girl has gone under—been scooped in while I was cavortin' 'round after you. Anyway she's gone."

"Let her go. She can well take care of herself; and with us she is a constant danger. I cursed the luck a thousand times that I spoke to her. She is a traitor too, for she sought to rob you and would have done it if I had not headed her off. Let her take her own chances; she knows the way back to Gila."

"What!" exclaimed Jones, in disgust. "You talk that way and pretend to be white?"

"Scarcely, scarcely. They don't allow us 'greasers' to be white at all. Yet what use now to talk? It is too late."

"It's never too late while there's life. By the eternal I'll save her if it's in the salt, and you'll help, if we have to charge the red devils ten deep."

"I? What can I do?"

"You can die; and you will if you throw up your cards before the game is played out. Here's one barrel for you at the first flinch. It's your fault three times over, and I'll hold you to your work."

He spoke recklessly enough, but he meant it all. The shining barrel was ready to emphasize his threat; and a hasty word might have brought on an explosion, for the sharp from Cinnabar, cool though he might talk, was in a flaming wrath. He sometimes did things that he regretted afterward, and perhaps it was as well that an interruption came now.

The two had moved once more into the shadow as they talked, and Mr. Jones had open ears for any sounds that might wander along on the night air.

He threw up his left hand suddenly, as he ceased speaking, and checked his companion's answer. Although the Apaches who had followed in pursuit had been momentarily at fault they did not give up the chase. Either instinct or supernatural acuteness brought them at length to the right spot. Half a dozen of them there were, armed with lances, bows, and one or two short muskets.

At that time the horse Indians of the far South-west knew next to nothing of breech-loaders and needle-guns, though some of them had old-fashioned muzzle-loaders and even revolvers. The bow was still the national weapon, and when used with aboriginal skill and power it was no mean tool at moderately close quarters; for arrow after arrow could be sent with deadly aim, and almost the rapidity of a repeating pistol. And at good gunshot distance, with anything like a careful aim, a brave could drive his iron-tipped arrows through and through the body of a man. When mounted they showed wonderful skill and courage in a *melee*; and afterward, when conquerors, they were more cruel than the grave.

All this Jones of Cinnabar knew, but when he saw the dusky outline of the coming foes he stood still as the night long enough to make out the size of the party; and then in an instant made up his mind.

"Come with me," he whispered. "I have six barrels here; save one or two of them and I'll care for the rest."

He wheeled his horse out softly, and then swept downward in a silent, murderous charge, his companion riding with him, not half a neck behind.

The distance was not great, and the ground was covered at racing speed.

At the run, and down hill with an uncertain light, or no light at all, Soft Hand knew that the chances for the revolver unless at close quarters were two to one against deadly work; and he did not intend to throw a shot away.

"Hist! hist!"

By them hurtled the arrows, and a hideous yell arose, but like a thunderbolt came the sharp; and at last his weapon began to speak.

"Crack! crack!"

Six times it spoke, in four seconds; and another revolver beside him was voicing its echoes. Then the little struggle was over. Three Apaches lay prone upon the ground, while three others lying low down upon the necks of their ponies, galloped away hard hit. As for Soft Hand he had a lance thrust in his side, an arrow in his shoulder and his face was covered with blood. Paula was untouched.

CHAPTER XXVI.
WHERE "SAND" WAS NEEDED AND TWO PARDS SHOW IT.

"I RECKON ther fun begins. Ef Madam Pharisee war along she'd hev a chance ter see us earn our money. Hark! Thar's ther 'Pash yell; an' thar's ther answer. Took by surprise, you bet, an' a leetle slow on the trigger; but we mustn't run 'em down, pard. Ef we don't hev a chance to chip in thar we needn't grumble. More ner likely we'll see how it is ourselves afore mornin'. How does it strike yer?"

"It strikes me that we're a pair of dog-goned fools to try turnin' an honest greeny this yere way when thar's so many fools fit fur pluckin' up yonder. Ef I war out I'd stay out; but I never bunch on me own deal, ez long ez thar's a chance ter turn up Jack. That's Hoyle."

"Say, yer ain't losin' yer sand?"

Honest Frank peered at the Tough in unpleasant surprise. He detected something in his voice that he had never heard before.

"Not fast, I ain't. I've several sacks full yit; an' it's so heavy it loads me down. We'll hev 'Pash fur breakfast by ther card. I war only thinkin' ov ther others. Thet Cinnabar sharp is a good man—I know'd him ov old—an' it's a dog-goned nice leetle gal he hes in tow. Ef he can't save her we must. Yer don't think he'd go back on her, do yer pard?"

"Nary onct. I know him too. He's a man from ther ground up, an' it takes a ladder ter weigh him. When ther pinch comes he'll remain. But we must keep a-edgin' along. It don't sound like his style o' work, an' we orter know who else is on this trail."

The noise of the distant conflict died away as rapidly as it had risen, and there were no signs to show how it had ended. As they felt their way carefully along the two listened in silence.

Then, at last, half a mile away, there arose the noise of a wonderfully rapid fusilade.

"That's him!" cried Frank gleefully. "Hear him shout! That's his style o' work; I'd know it a mile. Thar's music in ther air now, an' don't yer forget it?"

"He wins, too. Oh, he's a good man, and he don't care whether he lives or dies. That sort always pull through. I hate him, heavens, how I hate him; but for a pard to tie to in a tight place—unless it's you, he's my pick in a thousand."

"Hold hard, there; they're driftin' this way. Lay low an' let 'em go by. They're 'Pashes."

It was the remnant spared from the revolver of Soft Hand, and they were not hard to evade. A good deal bewildered they were, seeking the main body to report the fate of their comrades. When they had blundered on the two felt their way forward; but found nothing until morning dawned.

Then they saw—perhaps too much.

On a low ridge, a quarter of a mile away, were Soft Hand and the Mexican woman. Their bridles were over their arms and they stood boldly up in the glow of the opening day.

"Look," said Lucky Lake, pointing with his finger at the twain—"thar's two of 'em, but whar's the third? Curse them, have they gone back on the girl; or what has happened to her? She would stay with him until ther last horn blew."

"Be easy with yer cusses, we'll soon see what's ther racket. See, they are pointing yonder. They're lookin' ez keen fur her ez we be."

"And there she is!" interrupted the Tough.

The main body of the Apaches had just made an appearance, winding out from a shallow depression among the sand ridges, where they had been concealed.

Prisoners they had with them, the fruit of the last night's fray; and first of the lot the Tough from Tucson recognized the boyish figure for which he had been in search. His eyes remained glued to the spot; but those of Honest Frank roved around, taking in the whole situation.

"Wonder ef they kin chaw all they've got bit off. They ain't noways modest about showin' what they think's ther size ov ther take in. When ther earthquake rocks they'll wish they'd been a little more modest."

"How? Why?" muttered the Tough, absently.

"Can't yer see? They're so ding-blasted afeard we'll git away they've got us all surrounded. When they g'in ther yell in front

Soft Hand, Sharp.

they calculates movin' in from every side, an' scoopin' 'em right up. They ain't leavin' a knot-hole ter get away through."

It was just as Honest Frank said. The Indians seemed bent on making the capture of the whites a certainty, and had spread around so that there was no avenue of escape. Assured of the smallness of the force, they had been quietly waiting until morning should come and give the light for operations. Mad as they were, they were slow about coming in contact with that terribly quick revolver. The question was, what were they going to do now?

So thoroughly well had the disguise been made up that the red-skins had not yet recognized the girl that was within the garments of a boy; and she kept up her assumed character with a wonderful firmness.

Evidently the Apaches were not anxious to linger here too long, or to be burdened with prisoners. They were out on a war-trail, and had not yet struck. They intended to take Soft Hand, but beforehand wanted to give him a taste of what was immediately in store for him. There was some little commotion and confusion in the ranks; then their terrible game presented itself.

Four stout ponies were led out into an open space, and four stout ropes of rawhide with a standing loop in each that fitted to the neck of a mustang something like a collar, and about fifty feet of rope to trail behind.

Back to back the ponies stood, with the ends of the rope held slackly at a center by four Indians. In front a hundred yards, that is between the ponies and the ridge where Soft Hand crouched, a dozen of the best armed Apaches were drawn up in line, ready for any sudden charge.

Slowly and methodically were these dispositions made. Then, in the midst of a chorus of yells, they dragged forward the shrinking form of their boy captive.

"Satan on wheels!" huskily exclaimed Honest Frank, who had been watching these preparations. "They're goin' ter draw an' quarter ther gal!"

It was not hard to explain the intentions of the red-men. A rope to each of those tender wrists and ankles, and a frightened pony at the end of each rope, to dash madly off for the forty or fifty feet of its tether and then be brought to a standstill by the shock when steed suddenly pulled against steed, and all the strain was thrown upon the body of the wretched victim. It might not kill at once—a disappointment to the red fiends it would be if it did—but what joints it left undislocated or bones unbroken would be those not in the line of the power.

In among the snorting ponies she stood for a moment—white enough no doubt, and perhaps trembling—but there was no sign of scream or tears, though she knew the horrid thing with which she was face to face.

Only once she outstretched her hands, as she looked toward Soft Hand. The gesture said, help me if you can.

Then the rude hands grasped her. The test of bone and sinew was about to begin.

The Tough from Tucson looked up. He was quivering with emotion; those who said he could not feel belied him wonderfully. At best or worst little was known of him except that he had done very cruel things, and was a wonderful hand with his weapons.

"It was for work of this kind that you were chosen—Pard, have you got the sand? If you fail me, I'm going alone."

"Drive on, I'm with you."

Then without even a spare second to arrange their plans they spurred madly out and down.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FIGHT TO THE DEATH.

It would have been worth another pair of revolvers had the two understood a few moments sooner the mystery of the preparations. When they had fully mastered the intentions of the red-skins but little time was left to balk them, and their charge if it reached the line of the Apaches, might only precipitate the catastrophe.

There was one thing only in their favor. The red skins did not seem aware of the presence of Honest Frank and his pard, the little Tough from Tucson. They had eyes only for Soft Hand, who, like the others on the opposite ridge, watched with some uncertainty. As

a result the two were out from their cover and riding knee to knee down the hill; and yet no one noticed their advance. They came like a whirlwind, but with set teeth and silent tongues. Until they reached close quarters no cry would they willingly give.

They saw the cruel rope knotted to one round ankle, and then by a chance glance saw that the man from Cinnabar was coming too, riding down as ready and as reckless as themselves, though he was charging for the line of sentinels that stood with ready arms between him and the girl. A little behind him was the dubious creature that claimed the name of Paula Quemadura.

It on'y lasted for a few short seconds; then the ride was over and the work began. With reins hanging loosely and knees tightly gripping their mustangs they burst into the grouped warriors, and began their deadly work.

As quickly as thumbs and fingers could work the hammers rose and fell, and with each shot there came a death.

At the first report those who held the four ponies loosened their hold, springing for their weapons, and the animals, half tamed and frightened sped away.

One of them only was weighted by a load, and he bounded straight for the line of outside sentries. There was one frightful cry, wrung at last by actual agony from the lips of the girl, and then she was away, dragging behind the heels of the maddened animal. Through the line of the Apaches he burst just as Jones threw himself upon them from the front and Honest Frank and Munson rode upon their rear.

"Save her, save her!" shouted the Tough shrilly, still at work; and then, just as his hammers clicked idly on the empty cylinders he threw up his arms wildly and pitched forward upon the neck of his mustang, with an arrow feather deep through his back.

From his boots Honest Frank had drawn another pair of revolvers; he had slipped them there before he started on the charge. He was a shade in advance of his comrade and never saw his flight, though little good would it do if he had. No time was there for anything but to fight and kill—perchance, and indeed most likely, to be killed.

But Soft Hand saw one chance for the girl, at a score of risks for himself—and made the most of it. When the frightened pony burst through he recognized the tumbled thing dragging at the end of the rope behind it and wheeled away from the remnant of the throng in swift pursuit.

Rapidly he gained, for his mustang devoured three feet while the pony covered two.

Then bending low in the saddle, with his horse still at full speed he reached downward, swept the ground with his hand and gathered the girl up in his grasp; one wave of strength tossed her up before him; to cut the rope with ready knife was the work of a moment and then back he went in unchecked retreat, his Mexican ally, with empty revolver and bleeding hand, still beside him.

Straight up the hill they swept, as though from that vantage-ground resistance could a little longer and a little more hopefully be made. Half-way to the top Honest Frank joined him, and the steed of Luke Munson, still carrying its now fainting rider.

The four had given the Apaches a bloody surprise, but it was a question how long the advantage would remain with them.

Not very long; yet they hoped for a breathing-spell at least, enough to enable them to recharge their weapons.

An unexpected cry from above, and Soft Hand looked upward.

Over the crest of the ridge he saw heads rising; a throng of galloping horsemen swept toward him, uttering wild cries. Who were they?

Foes most likely. His hand was already on the reins to wheel when the new-comers poured in upon the Apaches a volley from their short rifles that completed the confusion. They were friends no doubt. Soft Hand rode on through their midst with his quivering, crumpled burden.

Four men, three of them at least marvelously skillful with their weapons, had been hard at work, and though all of them were more or less wounded, but one of them was past fighting. What execution had been done it may be as well not to tell lest it seem exaggeration, but the reader can well believe that the ground was strewed with many

corpses, and that the survivors had but little stomach for the renewal of the fray.

When a throng of men came firing and charging over the hill a panic swept through their ranks, and though they still largely outnumbered their assailants they turned and fled.

The man from Cinnabar slid from his horse as the charge swept by. He only saw that there were a dozen Mexicans in the throng. Carefully he laid down his burden and moistened the white lips with water from the can teen at his shoulder.

The eyes opened; the lips, after a little, moved.

"You have saved me, I will not die."

That reassured him.

There might be a dislocated limb, with some cuts and bruises, and even awful agony, but it would not be death.

As he knelt there a horseman galloped up and threw himself off at his very side, touching him lightly on the shoulder with one hand, but in the other holding a ready pistol. He was breathless, quivering, with torn clothes, parched mouth, and hollow eyes. All the same his voice was steady, save for a tinge of horror.

"Take your time," he said, "I would not tear you away from your victim, and it even goes against the grain to take back to the rope a man that has fought as you have fought; but I swore I'd have you, and I've kept my oath. You are my prisoner, charged with the murder of that girl's father. Do you surrender?"

It was Tom Hayes, the sheriff from Dog Hole.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE VAIL IS LIFTED, AND LUCKY LUKE HANDS IN HIS CHECKS.

SUCH a chance at such a time would have dumfounded almost any other man; Soft Hand only burst into a short, hard laugh.

"Laugh if you can. You are no man; you are a devil. You could slay her father, and then wile her away from those who could have loved her and cared for her. What spell you used I know not, but it has served you for the last time. Dog Hole justice is rude but very sure; and I'll take you there to receive it, or both of us will die on the road."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Soft Hand again. "For a deputy sheriff, you're about as near to an idiot as they make them. Do you think there is the man living that can take me back to Dog Hole? And what good would my hanging do you when your own funeral was just over? You wouldn't listen to reason when Kate was talking to you, and I reckon you'd sooner one argued with a club now, but I'll try solid sense on you once more, and if I can't make you understand the lay-out now I'll give you up. Who do you think this is?"

He pointed to the recumbent figure.

"Who should it be but Kate Knox, the girl who let the soft tongue of an assassin beguile her, who pleaded for you at the Silver Hall, and helping you to escape, joined you in your flight from Gila City?"

"Of all fools a jealous fool is the worst. You couldn't tell the imitation from the original. The girl who was at the Silver Hall was gotten up well enough, and was sharp enough to deceive you; but it wasn't Kate Knox. A little white paint and false hair goes a great ways with you; there she is, about two of the simonpure. I've told you who it wasn't; can you tell me who it is?"

Tom Hayes dropped his hand from the shoulder of the sharp and gazed with puzzled eyes at the face that was upturned. Soft Hand was right. The blonde hair was gone now, and about the black eyes there was something strangely familiar.

"You are right," he began, slowly. "I think—by heavens, the eyes are the eyes of Madam Pharisee!"

"Or her double," added Jones, with a meaning smile which the other did not notice.

"But this only makes it the worse for you; since it was after leaving her faro table Herman Knox was murdered by you, doubtless for the sake of the money he had won."

"You've found his body, have you?" asked Soft Hand, with a sneer.

"No, we have not. You know best why not, since you were seen carrying his corpse away."

"A lively corpse it was. Look at it now and judge for yourself. There it stands!"

He pointed, and Tom Hayes followed the

direction of his finger. It rested on Paula Quemadura, the so called Mexican woman.

The deputy sheriff, was open-mouthed.

"Yes, there he stands—a man that would fight the world and yet was afraid of a woman. He wrung that disguise in on me. I let him go. What's the use to argue with a fool? He's on her road now to see his husband's mother, 'way down at Altar. Examine him before she goes. I don't want any of his murder in mine."

"It's a true bill, Hayes, and when we've time I'll tell you the story all through. It was not he that tried to kill me, I'll swear to that, though if I'd known he knew me I would have slid out and given you one chance. It was he that saved me and I gave him my diamonds and deeds to carry home. Kate left too soon or the truth might have come out."

While they talked they forgot that they were not alone. An exclamation from Honest Frank startled them.

"I swear on me soul he wears a wig—the durned leetle red-headed cuss!"

Down from his horse into Honest Frank's arms had rolled the Tough from Tucson, apparently in a dead swoon, and as best he could be tried to revive him, and it was while so engaged that he made the astounding discovery.

"Never mind that," spoke Soft Hand sharply. "Is he hurt badly?"

"Rathyer. And—look hyar now, I ain't no fool; but I'll swear I believe he's a woman."

When the red wig was torn from its place the long black hair of a woman streamed out, and down around her face.

"Madam Pharisee again!" exclaimed Hayes; and again Soft Hand added, "or her double." Then the latter knelt by her side, as Honest Frank held her on his knee, and moistened her lips. Of all, Harper seemed most bewildered.

"Such a pard!" he said. "So lively on ther shoot! And now she's got an arrow clean through, till the point comes out on the other side. The one good woman in the world done fur in a squabble with the Pashes. Lord, Lord, James, whar war yer eyes?"

"But where is Kate?" whispered Tom Hayes to Herman Knox. He had changed his plan at last. The logic of self-evident facts was too strong for him.

"There."

The unexpected party that took up the charge as Soft Hand and the rest were falling back, now returned; and at the head rode a fragile, gray-eyed girl-woman, whom Hayes could swear that he recognized beyond a peradventure. She rode straight up to the group.

The boy-girl was gathering strength and for the horrible danger she had been in had received but little harm; but not so much could be said for the *ci-devant* Lucky Luke, whose life was fast oozing away, though the black eyes opened once more with a look of recognition. Her lips moved softly.

"Herman Knox!" she whispered.

"I was not mistaken," he said. "Madam Pharisee, and Varna Page—once my wife—were one. You have tried hard to wreck my life and take my fortune, but I forgive you. In all your terrible fall you at least had a wicked, fatal courage."

He stopped at that. Kate was standing near, her eyes open with horror.

"I did my best; but I schemed too far and wanted too much. Good-by! Keep it from her."

Soft Hand stepped forward. Even yet Kate Knox did not fully know the truth, that this desperate unsexed woman was her mother, and for the present it might be better that she did not learn it.

"Good-by Varna," he said, touching her hand lightly with his own. "You gave me a blow or two in my time, and brought me very close to a terrible death, but I reckon it's time to forgive."

It was hard to tell of what the woman was thinking. She muttered a little and they made out some of her words.

"I've had my wrongs too, but I don't go back on the truth. I get what I earned. But I've had grand times too, and fooled the best of you. Lucky Luke, the Tough from Tucson! Ha! ha! He war a pard to tie to. And Madam Pharisee. Oh, if I had had my youth I'd have beaten the world. Catalina is a good girl, too, my niece. They never knew there were two of us. When I was Luke she was Madam Pharisee. It war she who dealt the cards and won. Her fingers are nimbler. If she had no heart she would be a girl in a thou-

sand. Always willing. She loved me. Where is she?"

"Do not ask for her. The shock might kill her."

"Oh, yes, I know. But we rode down on them, Frank and I, and saved her. Where is Frank?"

"Hyar; it's my arm that's round yer and I'll stay by you clean through."

"Yes, you're the man to tie to; but it's all a mistake. I had no heart. I should have been a man."

"A solid one you'd made," whispered Frank.

"Yes, a man with the sand."

Her words had come slower and lower; she ceased her talking now altogether, her face took on a ghastly, ashen hue, and in her throat there sounded a hollow rattle.

The rest knew what was coming and turned away, but Honest Frank still held her in his arms. And so, an hour after daybreak the night came down.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"ALL DOWN BUT NINE."

WHAT little more there is to tell can be told in the compass of a very short chapter. The story that Varna told to Honest Frank before striking into the desert is enough to explain the aim and end of the different conspirators. To Varna it had seemed at one time that it would be possible as his widow to claim his portion, whatever it might be, for the pair had never been legally divorced. When she believed him dead she would have wrested his secrets from Soft Hand and Kate, since from a paper snatched from Knox's body she learned that there were diamonds of immense value, the proceeds of a fortune that he had lately realized, as well as title papers for a vast Mexican estate, and these had been placed in the hands of one of the two.

Varna would have had no objections to go to Mexico to enjoy a fortune, and would have been willing to reveal herself to Kate as her mother if by so doing she could have learned the secret of the Lost Lake Valley placers; but she was fated to fail. Kate followed instructions, and slipping through the hands of the Red League, which Varna had supposed had closed on her, found her father's ranch from which she had come searching on the route by which he crossed the desert.

Of the Red League a great deal more might have been said. How many members there were never was known, but half a dozen of its leading spirits perished in the desert with Page, their master mind. After that the order never flourished though it was a well banded organization, with members in many of the principal towns from San Francisco to the southern border, and on over into Arizona. It was a bad day for them when Page—who was Varna's brother by adoption—threw himself upon the trail of Herman Knox, with his fortune and his secret mine. Fate, the Tough from Tucson and the sharp from Cinnabar were too much for them. Yet if they had succeeded the reward would have been brilliant; for Herman Knox had a secret mine, though he kept its mystery well hidden.

He had his peons too, and his vaqueros and retainers, with whom he could have beaten off a small army of invasion. What then was the secret of the cowardly fear which he had shown in his dealings with Varna and Page?

Simply this: he had a wife. He would rather they had found his gold mines than her, since if Varna appeared on the carpet he knew not what complications might arise. And so he kept the secret of her existence—at almost the cost of his own—until Varna's death allowed him once more to breathe freely.

We left them all grouped in the desert. They had come together by a strange chance; and they did not immediately separate. Madam Pharisee's young double was not seriously harmed, and the wounds of all were trifling, but no one seemed to care to move northward, and many a curious or a yearning glance was cast in the opposite direction.

"I see how it is and must be," said Knox, who had discarded his feminine habiliments. "Come, then, all of you, and we will go to Lost Lake Valley. There is enough there and to spare, and the sheriff of Dog Hole can then consider at his leisure what return he will make to the powers that be when he returns his warrant unserved."

Tom Hayes looked slyly at Kate. It seemed

to him that she looked encouragement and he gave his consent.

So we leave them journeying over the desert. If courage and perseverance can win a woman Tom Hayes should win the gray-eyed girl. Herman Knox was at last relieved of a haunting dread, and rode lightly at last to meet the wife he had been so long absent from. Soft Hand the Sharp was as silent as usual; and Honest Frank, still puzzled by the *denouement*, was thinking of the woman who should have been a man with sand.

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